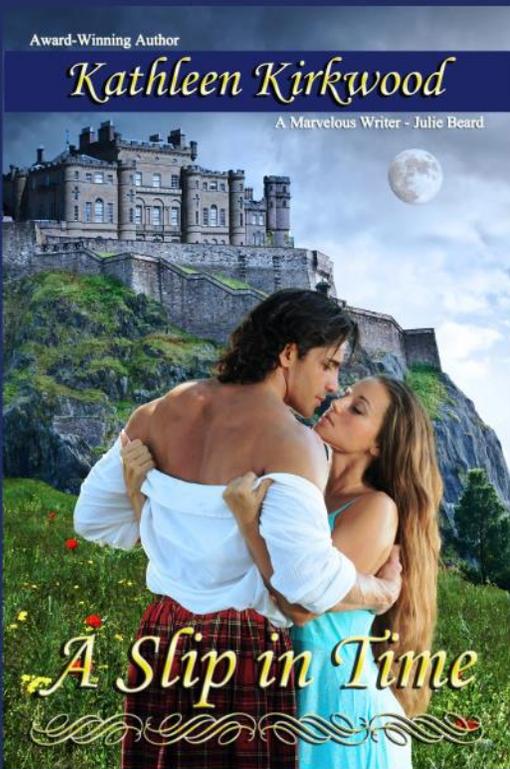
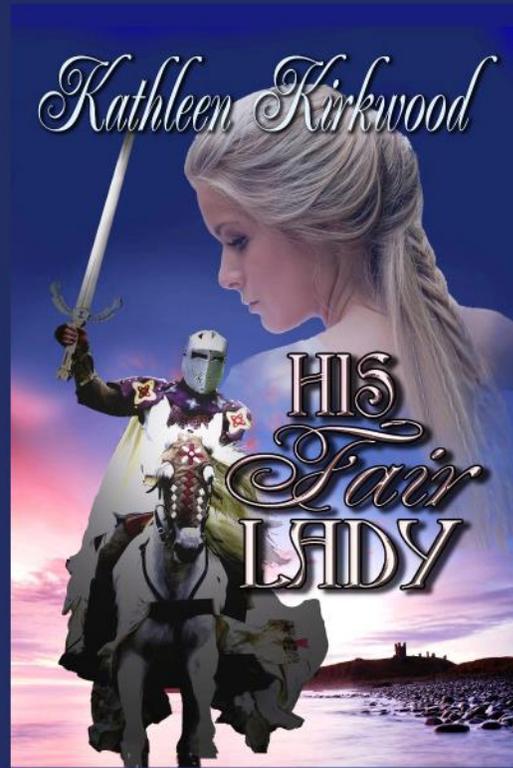


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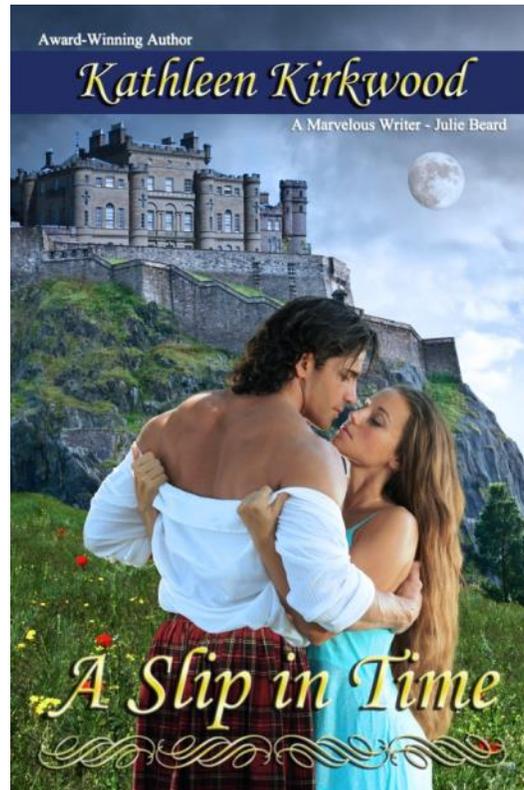
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A Slip in Time

By Kathleen Kirkwood



A Slip In Time

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Chapter 1

Scotland, September, 1893

Dunraven Castle. A chill of unease spiraled through Julia at the very thought of the name. Strange it should affect her thusly, yet it did, no less now than when first she heard it, two nights past — the night Emmaline burst in upon her solitude and made her ebullient announcement. . . .

“We’re off to Scotland, cousin! Lord Eaton has invited the lot of us to his Highland estate, Dunraven Castle. He leaves on the morrow, and we are to follow. Isn’t it exciting?”

Emmaline whirled off in a flurry of pastels and lace, leaving Julia slack-jawed and thoroughly aghast.

Scotland? On the morrow? How could her aunts have agreed to such? Certainly, she wished to leave Braxton Hall, but she longed to return to Hampshire, not the distant wilds of the Scottish Highlands. Indeed, she had intended to broach the subject with her aunts over breakfast and remained determined to still. It was why she had retired early, forgoing the customary gathering for charades and whist. She had polished and practiced her speech till it flowed most persuasively from her lips.

But now this. How could Aunt Sybil and Aunt Rachel accept so precipitous an invitation? And from Lord Eaton. Now there was a packet of trouble. . . .

The shrill of the steam whistle pierced Julia’s ears, jolting her back to the present, back to the constant rattling and shaking of the train beneath her. She huddled deeper into her thin woolen cloak, her fingers stiff with cold.

“Oh, look!” Emmaline enthused beside her, wiping the droplets of condensation from the window with her handkerchief. “A castle. Isn’t it splendidly romantic?”

As she spoke, the solid, rumbling resonance of the wheels and rails changed to one of hollow clattering. The mountains nearby, muted by mist and drizzle, slipped suddenly from view.

Julia leaned forward to see around Emmaline’s caped and behatted figure. Still, this proved difficult as the bench they shared faced backward, and the scenery could only be glimpsed as it flew past and disappeared down the line.

Closing the space between them, Julia peered out through the mizzling rain. And regretted it instantly. The train raced along a viaduct, high above the rolling landscape and at a fabulous speed. Her stomach did a flip-flop, threatening to turn completely as it had so many times since leaving London early this morn. She steeled herself and at Emmaline’s insistence looked again.

She saw now that the viaduct curved in a wide arc, following the contours of a deep and sheltered glen. Far below, at the heart of the glen, Julia spied the unroofed ruins of a centuries-old tower house. Its red-sandstone keep rose from a spit of land that projected into a silvery loch. A gauzy mist wreathed the grounds and tower remnants, lending the scene an enchanted, otherworldly aspect.

Lilith, Julia and Emmaline’s elder cousin and the third in their party, stirred on the cushioned bench opposite. She rose from her reclining position and gazed out the window.

“A castle?” Lilith sniffed. “That crumbling pile?”

“Oh, but surely it was once a great fortress,” Emmaline declared. “It looks to have endured a tempestuous history, does it not? Imagine all it has witnessed throughout the centuries. If only its stones could but whisper, such tales they would weave of the proud Highland chieftains who once dwelled there. And loved there,” she added the last with a wistful sigh.

A smile stole through Julia. The tapestry bag at Emmaline's feet held a cache of Scott's stirring romantic novels — *Waverly*, *Rob Roy*, *The Fair Maid of Perth*, and more, all well worn. Like so many of their countrymen racing north, Emmaline had caught the “Scottish Fever.” Julia began to tease her of as much when Lilith spoke.

“Your 'proud Highland chieftains' of yesteryear were little more than coarse barbarians, dear cousin.”

“Say what you will.” Emmaline tossed her dark curls, smiling. “But, I'd wager they were immensely more passionate and colorful than any of the men in our company this summer.”

Surprise stung Lilith's eyes, as though she had just received a personal affront. Her lips formed a response, but before she could voice it, Emmaline turned back to the window, giving a light shrug.

“Well, almost any of the men.”

Julia blinked, unsure about to whom Emmaline referred. Lilith eased her rigid pose, presumably believing Emmaline included Lord Eaton in her comment. It was no secret that Lilith — and her mother, Julia's Aunt Sybil — had staked her future hopes on the exceedingly blue-blooded, exceedingly wealthy Roger Dunnington, Lord Eaton. Yet, Julia's instincts told her Emmaline held someone else in mind. Someone in their company, then? Traveling to Dunraven?

Lilith regarded Emmaline a long moment as if considering the same. She then reached across and patted her hand, concern stitching her brow.

“I do worry for your judgment, cousin. Fantasies aside, 'passion' and 'color' might offer temporary diversion, excitement even, but they cannot replace more solid, reassuring qualities in a man such as titles and privilege. Those are the things upon which you must set your heart, if you are to make an advantageous match.”

“Titles are not qualities. And surely a heart must be given to more than cold fortune,” Emmaline retorted, quick, defensive.

A shade too quick and too defensive to Julia's mind, and she wondered how the conversation had skipped from phantom chieftains of centuries past to husband-hunting among the peerage.

“Do not dismiss their import so quickly,” Lilith continued. “Passion and color fade. Then what is left a woman? You have heard our mothers speak. Choices poorly made carry a lifetime of consequences.” She slid a glance to Julia, an indefinable look entering her eyes. “Do you not agree?” her tone turned candy sweet.

Julia recognized the hidden barb, directed at her own parents' marriage, but she answered anyway. “Some choices, well made, regardless of station, prove without regrets.”

A thin smile unfurled over Lilith's lips. “Of course, you would think so.” Drawing up the high fur collar of her pelisse, she settled back against her seat and feigned rest, yet her smile remained.

A stricken look washed over Emmaline's face and she started to speak, but Julia shook her head. She blamed herself for playing into Lilith's manipulations. Again. Soon enough, Julia promised herself, she would return to Hampshire and be no longer plagued by Lilith's ill manners. She would miss Emmaline, however.

Julia nibbled her lip, her thoughts circling back to who might have captured her cousin's affections. Julia could think of several in their company with more dash than station. She could also imagine Aunt Rachel's horror to find her daughter enamored of any one of them.

Another scream of the whistle caused Julia to jump. In the next moment, daylight disappeared and the pounding of the train amplified threefold as they entered a tunnel.

Gratefully, gaslights burned continuously in the compartments on Scottish lines. She owed this to the numerous tunnels through which they passed, some miles long.

She prayed the tunnel would prove short, for every discomfort of rail travel seemed magnified in its confines — the pungent odors of the engine's discharge, soot sifting through the window margins, the deafening noise as the iron giant labored up the gradient, plus the relentless jarring and the unsettling motion of traveling backward. Julia pressed her lashes shut and tried to ignore her stomach as it roiled beneath her wretchedly tight stays.

She forced her mind to more pleasant thoughts. Stubbornly, they returned, time and again, to the prick of Lilith's comments.

Julia released a small sigh. She did not belong here, in the highborn circles of her mother's family. Not truly. The Symington ties had been severed years before, upon her parents' wedding day. And until their deaths, those ties remained broken, punishment to a daughter who dared choose her heart over the desires of her parents.

It had been a year since the tragedy. Since the ship sank off the coast of Ceylon, taking her beloved parents and all those aboard. Then, several days after the memorial services, the inconceivable happened.

Julia had spent a grueling morning with her father's former partner and their solicitor, reviewing matters of the estate's debts. No sooner did she see them out of her home, when a dark green phaeton, bearing the Symington crest, pulled before the entrance. A footman hastened to open the door and a woman emerged, diminutive in size but ramrod straight and heavily veiled in black. Julia remained fixed in place, stunned as she realized her visitor to be none other than the “old lioness” herself, Arabella Symington, her maternal grandmother.

They stared at one another for long moments before Julia recovered enough to invite her visitor inside. At first, Lady Arabella moved silently through the rooms, reaching out at times to touch some cherished object — a family photograph, her mother's lace fan and silver hair brushes. But when she discovered a china doll, once belonging to Julia's mother as a small child, Arabella's steely control crumbled. She clutched the doll to her breast and sobbed her daughter's name till her voice went raw with grief. Julia watched astounded, and in that moment she could nearly forgive her grandmother the past. Nearly.

Much later, they sat in the front parlor, sharing tea in silence. Her grandmother, composed and dry-eyed, studied Julia closely. Julia assumed it to be a trial for her to do so, for she possessed her father's golden looks and his clear green eyes. Yet, she knew she bore a marked resemblance to her mother as well, about the nose and mouth, and in the tilt of her brows.

At length, her grandmother broke her silence, setting down her teacup, some decision made. “You will come to Gramercy with me, child,” she stated with the air of one accustomed to giving orders. “There, your needs can be comfortably met while you see through the months of mourning, and we weigh the possibilities for your future.”

Whatever Julia expected it was not this. Why should she accept an invitation from the family that had treated her mother so callously, or allow any of them a say in her future? She started to decline, but her grandmother raised a hand, staying her.

“I am an old woman filled with regrets. Regrets that will burn in my soul long after I die. I cannot undo the past. But let me do this much — for both your parents. For you.”

Lady Arabella paused, fidgeting with the cameo at her throat as she considered her next words.

“I know that your circumstances are, shall we say, straightened, that your parents' investments — the cargo they accompanied — went down with them at sea. You have many

decisions to make, and I suspect your fine home will need be let out, if not sold. Meanwhile, come to Gramercy, child. If for no other reason, it was your mother's girlhood home. She loved it dearly. And if you do not know it, she first met your father there, too. Perhaps, you can find something of them both at Gramercy still.”

And so it was that Julia entered the gilded world of the aristocracy. The world her mother once forsook.

But if it pleased her grandmother to take her under wing, Julia received a frosty reception from the other members of the family — her mother's brother, Henry, now Lord Symington, Earl of Wye, and his countess, Sybil, as well as her mother's younger sister, Rachel, the Viscountess Holbrooke.

The months crawled past. While Julia secluded herself in Kent, garbed in black, her cousins, Lilith and Emmaline, sparkled through the gala court balls and bright entertainments of London society. Gossip-filled letters arrived daily from their mothers, updating Lady Arabella as to their daughters' successes and news of the most promising catches of the Season.

As it happened, the end of Julia's period of mourning coincided with the conclusion of the London gaieties and the beginning of the midsummer migrations among the stately country houses. Before the latter commenced, Lady Arabella packed Julia and herself off to her town house in London's exclusive West End. There she summoned the family and announced that Julia would accompany Lilith and Emmaline on their forthcoming social rounds. This brought wails of protest from Julia's aunts. But the “old lioness” prevailed.

Within days, Julia joined her aunts and cousins on the dizzying social circuit, traveling from one grand estate to the next, staying no more than a handful of days in any one place. From the first, Emmaline welcomed Julia with sisterly affection, delighted to have gained a fresh relation. Lilith, however, like her mother, held her with disdain.

Julia refused to feel diminished by such haughtiness. Yet, she understood their reticence to her presence. While this was Emmaline's first Season, it was Lilith's third. If she did not snare a husband this time out, she risked being labeled stale goods and doomed to spinsterhood. Lilith needed no additional competition in the field.

Julia resolved to enjoy her summer wanderings, no matter her reception. She fancied she retraced her own mother's footsteps of years past. Especially of one summer, when the lovely debutante, Helen Symington, declined the proposal of a duke of royalty to marry a baronet.

Myriad diversions filled her days — recreations of every order, elegant teas and soirees, sundry sporting events, and ceremonious meals. Of an evening, there were the requisite charades and whist and sometimes a dance, lasting till midnight in a tent on the lawn beneath the stars.

Into this dazzling world came a steady stream of missives from Lady Arabella, filled with matriarchal advice and expectations. Surely, Julia would find a suitable match, she heartened. Not a titled first son of course, but a second or third. Though Julia's dowry be slim, she *was* a Symington “of the blood” after all, her lineage ancient and illustrious.

The days slipped past. Despite the legion of guests passing through the great houses, Julia became well acquainted with many, their paths crisscrossing throughout July and August. She first believed this to be coincidence. But it soon became apparent that a steadily swelling group arranged their itinerary to “drift in tandem.” The smooth-spoken Lord Eaton seemed at the core of this merry band.

By summer's close, the excitement and glamour of elite society began to pale. The pleasure-seeking nobles were an indolent lot, Julia found. Their most pressing concerns centered on staving off their perpetual boredom.

Such aimlessness wore on Julia. She longed to gain focus to her life. Direction and purpose. In truth, she longed to return to Hampshire and continue the charitable endeavors of her parents in their village.

Her decision made, she prepared to approach her aunts. But that very night Lord Eaton had issued his impulsive invitation. Next morning, amidst a flurry of packing, Julia appealed to her aunts. They dismissed her request out of hand, declaring they would not risk another of the “old lioness's” verbal mauulings.

Without further discussion, they set off for London and Kings Cross station, excepting Aunt Rachel, who chose to stay behind. Now with each mile Julia journeyed farther from her goal. She refused defeat, however. Tomorrow morning, she purposed to pen a letter to her grandmother and make her plea directly. Surely there would be a means at Dunraven to post it.

Dunraven Castle. There it was again. That prickly feeling that tingled across the back of her neck and shoulders and down her spine.

Perhaps it was just her aversion to being in the same company as Lord Eaton once more, she reasoned. She didn't trust the man. Oh, he was charming and mannerly and tolerable enough in looks. But there had been discomfoting instances when he seemed to shadow her, once trailing her on the winding paths at Asridge and then again at Saltram.

Rumors reached her ears, too, of his fondness for the gaming dens and for certain actresses in Regent Street. The very hastiness of his invitation northward, coupled with his disappearance from Braxton, puzzled Julia. He caught the overnight Express, she was informed, ostensibly to open Dunraven and ready it for the expected entourage, the guests and their servants numbering some thirty-odd.

Julia pulled her thoughts from Lord Eaton, disquieting sensations still eddying through her. The sooner she could leave Dunraven Castle the better.

»«

The train emerged from the tunnel to bruised but brighter skies. The rain fell faster now, in sheets, splattering the windows. Mountains thrust upward all around, their drama masked by the drenching downpour. Wooded glens soon gave way to softly rolling hills which, in turn, flattened out as the train reached the coast. Here, masts of fishing vessels crowded the shoreline. In short order a whistle blast was heard, announcing their arrival at Dunbar, one of the rare but brief stops on the line.

Julia looked up as Aunt Sybil hastily rejoined them, having left them at the previous stop to move several compartments forward to the saloon car. As the train rolled out of Dunbar and headed inland, Aunt Sybil settled herself.

“We shall reach Edinburgh within the hour, I am told,” she announced crisply, her gaze compassing Lilith and Emmaline but never touching Julia. “There, we shall change trains and be on our way to Perth, our final stop. Lady Bigsby informs me Lord Eaton's carriage shall be waiting. It shan't hold us all, of course.” She bent her gaze meaningfully to Julia. “But we may hire what transport is available for the remainder of the journey. Being Scottish, though, it will no doubt prove outmoded.”

At that, she fell to sharing the gossip she had gleaned in the saloon car and spoke of possible excursions to the spa at Strathpeffer and to Royal Deeside. The Prince, she confirmed, was in residence at Albergeldie.

Within the hour, the train smoked into Waverly Station, situated in a deep and open ravine in the heart of Scotland's capital. The city towered all around, its crow-stepped gables, multilevel

tenements and soaring spires adding to its height. Edinburgh Castle dominated all, frowning down from its craggy perch.

Julia disembarked on wobbly legs, immensely grateful to gain solid ground. Joining the others in their group, she moved swiftly along the concourse, beneath the station's vast glass dome.

The sky above appeared darkly battered now, its wind-tossed rains buffeting the glass with considerable vigor. On she pressed through the mad rush that mobbed the station. It would seem half of Britain had emptied itself, come for the hunt and recreation.

Julia hoped for a brief respite from the strains of their travels, but with a scant fifteen minutes to switch trains, luggage and all, it was not to be. Renovations in the station complicated the transition, making for detours up, down, and through numerous steps and passageways.

Boarding the train destined for Perth, Julia found herself and Emmaline under the watchful eyes of Nettie, her aunt's personal maid. Meanwhile, Aunt Sybil sought out the saloon car, taking Lilith with her.

Leaving Edinburgh and the Pentland Hills behind, the train headed north and climbed through Dalmeny. The majestic Forth Bridge came into view, with its cantilever trusses and diamond-shaped towers shooting upward to a phenomenal height. In minutes, they traversed a massive stone viaduct, then entered onto the bridge proper with its surpassing views.

On the other side, the train followed the shore to Kircaldy. Veering inland, it passed over the richly wooded Leven valley before it swung north, climbing ever upward, into the Central Highlands.

With each passing hour, the weather continued to deteriorate. The temperature inside the compartment plummeted. Numbed with cold, her stomach mutinous, Julia sought relief in sleep. She managed to doze lightly for a time, stirring to see their arrival in Perth, where it stretched along the Tay.

As promised, Lord Eaton's private coach awaited. In preemptive fashion, Sybil appropriated seats for herself, Lilith, and Emmaline, abandoning Julia to the care of acquaintances from Braxton.

"Won't you join us, my dear?" invited Lady Charles, sympathy touching her features. The plumes on her bonnet bobbed as she gestured to an aged equipage that stood before them. "There is ample room. Do come."

Julia stepped quickly through the downfall and climbed into the traveling carriage. Two gentlemen in their company followed, Lord Cuthburt Withrington and Sir Robert Longford. Within moments the horses set off.

Tracking the other conveyances in the entourage, they journeyed deep into the mountains, passing through cloistered glens and narrow gorges. One valley led into another and, at times, the other coaches slipped out of sight.

Every ten to twelve miles, they would come across a little post house where the horses could be changed or rested. Here, they could briefly rejoin their friends and refresh themselves with thin hot soup and oatcakes, though more often than not, whiskey proved the sole staple.

Julia's stomach would tolerate naught. She felt dizzy and bruised to her bones from all the tossing about. Still, she welcomed each respite, noting with some concern their coach lagged increasingly behind the others.

What had been soaking rains now became a brawling storm. Fierce winds pummeled the carriage, causing it to sway. Darkness closed in, requiring the coach lanterns to be lit early. Julia wondered if she'd survive this wild and empty land.

A fit of shivering suddenly took hold of Julia, owing more to her fatigue than the icy drafts breezing over her. She drew up her lap rug but it aided her little.

“Allow me.” Sir Robert leaned forward, offering his own blanket. He tucked the plaid about her so she was well layered in its thick, woolen folds.

“Bound to improve, you know. The weather that is.” Sir Robert smiled easily, causing ray lines to appear at the corners of his eyes. “If one thing is predictable about Scottish weather, Miss Hargrove, it is that it is thoroughly *unpredictable*. As it has been devilish since we crossed the border, I’d say we are due for a change any time now.”

“*Devilish?*” piped in Lady Charles, resituating herself beside Julia after another jolt. “The weather has been positively diabolical. How you men think to hunt in it, I cannot conceive.”

Lord Withrington, who shared the bench opposite with Sir Robert, peered over the top of his steel-rimmed glasses.

“Longford is quite right. Bound to improve. But I, for one, don’t intend to allow a patch of bad weather to deter me in the least. Some of the finest sport is to be found in this portion of Scotland.”

“But how will you manage it, let alone find the creatures in such a broil?” Lady Charles persisted.

“My dear lady, I’ve sported throughout the Highlands for many a season and in considerably wetter climes.”

Lady Charles looked to Julia, mouthing Lord Withrington’s last words in disbelief.

“All that as it is,” he continued, ignoring her look, “I wouldn’t miss this opportunity. To my memory, this is the first time Dunraven has opened its doors to guests in two decades. I don’t know how young Eaton convinced his uncle to agree to it, but I am supremely gratified he did. Mark my words. The forests will be thick with game.”

“Lord Eaton’s *uncle?*” Julia puzzled. “I thought Dunraven was Lord Eaton’s estate.”

“Oh no, my child.” Lady Charles wagged her head. “Roger Dunnington has yet to come into his titles. No, ‘Lord Eaton’ is only his courtesy title. Lord Muir, his uncle, is quite alive, though a tad ancient, seventy if he is a day. It is he who bears the title of marquis. He holds lesser titles and estates in England and Scotland, as well, including that of Twenty-seventh Laird of Dunraven Castle.”

“But, you say Lord Muir has invited no guests these twenty years past?” Sir Robert injected, looking to Lord Withrington. “Is there a reason?”

Lord Withrington dragged on his chin in thought. “It’s all rather mysterious, actually. There was a day when the castle hosted numerous hunts. But Lord Muir closed it up quite abruptly one season and without explanation.”

“True,” Lady Charles concurred. “My late husband attended several hunts at Dunraven in his younger years. He knew Lord Muir personally and praised him as a superb marksman and a genial host.”

A line pleated her brow as she reached for some thread of memory.

“I believe Nigel attended that last autumn. The hunting was prime, the men of good cheer; then, on the final night of their stay, Lord Muir retired early as he was wont to do. Something occurred in the night. Or so one presumes. The next morning, he did not appear to bid his guests farewell. He became somewhat of a recluse after that and closed Dunraven to visitors.”

“Rumor holds it possesses some murky secret,” Lord Withrington added.

“Possesses?” Sir Robert’s brows rose. “As in *possessed?* Heads floating in the castle halls, glowing green ladies, phantom pipers?”

“No, no, man. Nothing like that. But there is something peculiar about the place. Something . . .” Lord Withrington groped for the word. “Something *hidden*. Why else shut up the castle for so long? Should make for an interesting stay, eh what?”

Julia could not believe her ears. After the rigors of the day, must she now sleep in a castle harboring dark secrets?

“Well, I do hope we shall be soon to Dunraven,” Lady Charles opined. “Nights are obsidian in the Highlands, and tonight there will be no moon.”

“No moon?” Julia wrapped her plaid more tightly about her. “Ah, you mean it is the night of the New Moon.” Instinctively, she glanced to the window.

“Careful.” Sir Robert's comment drew her gaze back. “There are mysterious forces surrounding the moon. Or so the Scots believe. They have a rich lore dealing with lunar cycles — when to cut one's hair, dig ditches, plant crops, marry — all based upon whether the moon is waxing or waning, rising or setting. On the night of the New Moon, it is courting bad luck to gaze at it through glass.”

“Preposterous,” Lord Withrington protested. “You mean to say, if I should even look through my spectacles, or out this window here, ill would befall us?” Putting his bewhiskered face to the window, he purposely stared out. “See. No harm done.”

At that, lightning fissured the sky, followed by peals of thunder. The coach lurched hard to a stop, as if a giant hand reached out of the ground and seized the back wheel, pulling it down into the mire.

With the other carriages far in advance and unaware of their plight, the little group was left to rely upon themselves. The men gallantly assisted the driver, while the ladies took refuge under umbrellas, wrapping themselves in plaids.

An hour later, dislodged from its muddy trap, the coach lumbered on. Next to the loss of her parents, Julia thought, surely, Scotland was her worst nightmare.

At Devils Elbow they left the main route and proceeded slowly through the ponderous mountains, into the teeth of a galloping squall. The skies clashed and roared all about, and they feared the horses would bolt. Cautiously, they traversed narrow passages, climbing and plunging with sometimes no more leeway to the precipice than a hand's stretch.

Spectacular flashes of lightning filled the sky as they arrived long last at Dunraven Castle. Despite Sir Robert's warnings, Julia looked out and caught sight of the castle. Another flash of lightning revealed a massive, truncated tower rising on one end, while a Jacobean extension crowned with corbels, turrets, gables, and pepperpots sprawled eastward in a haunting but pleasingly proportioned array.

The carriage ground to a halt, and the gentlemen climbed out quickly, in turn, aiding the ladies.

The wind and rain whipped wildly about Julia as she emerged from the carriage. A sharp crack of lightning drew her attention, once more, to the massive tower.

In her fatigue, she imagined it watched her, contemplated her. Cold — or was it apprehension? — shivered along her spine. Lord, but what she would give to be in Hampshire now, or even Braxton Hall for that matter. As she gazed on the brooding tower, she wondered what secrets its ancient stones held.

At that, the sky fired with dramatic display — a spidery hand reaching down to earth as if it would snatch both her and the tower right up. Julia gasped, the air catching in her lungs.

As the spectacle dissolved into ebony darkness, the castle door pulled open. Grim-faced servants appeared, dimly illumined in torchlight, bidding them enter Dunraven Castle.

Chapter 2

Julia stood dripping onto the flagstone floor and took in the cavernous hall with its high vaulted ceiling and walls bristling with antlers.

To her left, a peat fire blazed in a great, yawning fireplace, its light crowding back the darkness that swamped the chamber. Half-spent torches flickered in iron brackets affixed to the wall. These created pockets of illumination down the length of the hall — wavering, ruddy gold pools, tilting against the gloom.

Opposite the entrance, to the chamber's far end, rose a magnificent stone staircase. A dozen broad steps reached up to a spacious landing. There, as below, ornate candelabra crowned the newels — rearing bronze stags, sprouting heads full of antlers, the points spiked with tapers. From the landing, twin flights swept to an upper gallery, the whole of it swallowed in shadows.

Julia's gaze drew downward. At ground level, right and left of the staircase, and then again behind it, on the back wall, passages led off, each vanishing into an Egyptian darkness.

The torches and tapers proved a feeble match for the vast expanse of the hall, Julia observed as she continued to glance about, noticing for the first time an immense tapestry covering the wall to her right, its hunting theme barely discernible in the dimness.

Truly these were the lodgings of a gamesman, a man unrelievedly passionate for the sport. And yet, Dunraven had welcomed no hunters for nigh on to twenty years. How was it their group should be allowed here now, she wondered? Did Lord Eaton hold such sway with his uncle? Julia decided she very much looked forward to meeting the “ancient” laird of Dunraven Castle.

The storm rumbled without, as if in response to her thoughts. The fine hairs lifted on the nape of her neck, and she clutched her sodden cloak closer, over her chest.

“Yer wrap, miss.” The butler's voice sounded behind her, scabbed with impatience.

Julia turned and met his dour gaze. He stared at her from beneath a bramble of brows, a gruff-looking little man, no taller than she. Squarish in build and kilted in red, he possessed a receding crop of coppery hair and full side whiskers, threaded liberally with gray.

Julia fumbled with the fastener at her throat as he continued to wait and glare.

“We've created a small lake, I fear,” she offered conversationally, spying the puddles that mottled the floor where she and her companions had tread.

“So ye have,” he agreed sourly.

Without further comment, he accepted her mantle and moved off to aid Sir Robert. At the same time, a tall, needle-thin woman came forward. Dressed in an unadorned dress of gunmetal gray, her hair skinned back into a knot, the woman presented a stark contrast to the colorful, bandy-legged Scotsman.

“The floor will clean up tidily enough,” the woman informed, her voice as expressionless as her narrow face. “I am Mrs. McGinty, the housekeeper. You have met Mr. McNab.” She gestured to where the butler now retreated from the hall, his arms laden with a mound of sopping coats and cloaks.

“The fires in the parlor were extinguished several hours past when the ladies retired for the night. I must ask that you remain here. The hearth will afford you sufficient warmth while you await Lord Eaton.”

The housekeeper withdrew, gliding over the flagstones with an eerie grace, her spine arrow-straight, shoulders level with the floor, head never bobbing.

“I do believe the woman's face would crack if she attempted a smile.” Lord Withrington echoed Julia's thoughts as she joined him and Lady Charles before the expansive fireplace.

“Such a gloomy twosome,” Lady Charles declared. “Let us hope the rest of the staff is more cheerful.”

Dull thunderings sounded without. Julia wrapped her arms about her and looked to where Sir Robert paced the length of the hall, examining varied trophies of the hunt. As he neared the far end, light spilled from an unseen door, illuminating the passage to the left of the stairs. In the next breath, Lord Eaton appeared, accompanied by a half dozen or more men, all of whom Julia recognized as having traveled from Braxton.

“We'd quite given up on you!” Lord Eaton greeted brightly, relief evident in his voice.

Tall and mustached, he cut a dashing figure in his costly smoking jacket of quilted satin and velvet. His hair waved from a fashionable center part and gleamed of Macassar oil which made it several shades darker than its true russet color.

Julia considered Lord Eaton to be passable in looks but not truly handsome. His was a meticulously fostered image, both in style and manners, one that engendered an aura of attractiveness and a certain magnetism. Yet at times, behind the polish and charm, Julia thought to glimpse . . . something. She could not quite lay a finger to it, but she sensed it to be somehow disingenuous.

Lord Eaton clasped hands in welcome with Sir Robert then moved toward Lord Withrington, repeating the same, and finally bowed to the ladies.

“We were just now discussing forming a search party and who should go. Jove, but the lot of you are sopped to the gills!”

Julia smoothed a self-conscious hand over her traveling dress, knowing the lower portion of her skirt to be saturated. The bows and lace on her bonnet drooped as did Lady Charles's feathers, a rather soggy mess that dragged over the brim of her chipped-straw hat. The men's trousers fared worse, not only drenched but mud-splattered, attesting to their labors.

“Confounded piece of luck, don't you know.” Lord Withrington adjusted his glasses. “Roads went to pudding and sucked in our carriage right up to the axle. Took an eternity in the bloody downpour to liberate it.”

Lord Eaton's dark eyes whisked to Julia, sweeping over her none too discreetly before shifting to Lady Charles.

“What a wretched welcome to the Highlands. But here, we must see you all into some dry clothes and put some heat back into your bones.”

Catching sight of the housekeeper reentering the hall, Lord Eaton turned to her.

“Mrs. McGinty, bring plaids for our guests before they catch their death in this drafty hall, and see what McNab is doing about the luggage. We'll need a fire built in the parlor and some hot tea.”

The potent odors of cigar smoke and whiskey assailed Julia's nostrils as Lord Eaton and his companions crowded about them, inquiring further of their mishap. Julia lifted a hand to cover a sudden cough. Obviously, the men had come directly from that venerable male sanctum, the smoking room. She coughed again, then cleared her throat.

“My dear Julia, are you well?” Lord Eaton closed the space between them, catching her hands in his, concern charging his features. “You haven't a jot of color and your fingers are freezing.”

Julia repossessed herself of her hands, nettled that he took the liberty of addressing her by her first name when she had never given him license. Again the brawny odors of tobacco and liquor assaulted her.

“Thank you, Lord Eaton” She cleared her throat once more. “But I would much prefer to join my aunt and cousins now and turn in for the night.”

She half expected him to instruct her to call him “Roger” as he ever did when she used his title. Instead, he paused, his lids dropping to hood his eyes. He raised a long forefinger to his chin then tapped it in thought.

“Actually, Lady Symington felt her accommodations to be somewhat cramped, what with herself and your two cousins.”

A discernible “harumph” issued from Mr. McNab, who, to Julia's surprise, had silently rematerialized and now stood just behind Lord Eaton's left shoulder.

“But have no fear.” Lord Eaton ignored the butler. “Dunraven boasts many agreeable rooms. Isn't that so, Angus?” He glanced over his shoulder, giving the Scotsman a hard eye.

“I'd say they're gettin' scarcer by the minute, m'lord.” He returned the look.

Julia took scant note of the butler's impudence, so shocked was she that her aunt had barred her from her room. It should come as no surprise, Julia reasoned. Had not Aunt Sybil methodically removed her from the mainstream of activity throughout the entire day? Had she not relegated her to the least comfortable accommodations and excluded her socially from the others in their company, both on the train and again in the coach, when she virtually had abandoned her at Perth's station? Now this.

Julia fought down a tide of anger welling inside her. Perhaps it would be preferable to be lodged apart, where she did not have to suffer such slights or insults. Yes, she would welcome a measure of solitude after months of being surrounded by strangers.

Julia looked to Lord Eaton and masked her agitation with a smile. “I shall be happy with any provision that can be made for me. If someone will only direct me to a chamber and send for Nettie —”

“Ah, there is another slight problem. Your aunt requested that our staff provide someone to assist you. Her maid, Nettie, is understandably overworked attending the three of them.”

“Yes, of course.” Julia floundered, stung yet again by her aunt's wiles.

In fairness, Aunt Rachel's maid, Dorrie, had remained behind with her at Braxton. It was Dorrie who had attended Julia throughout the summer along with Emmaline. Aunt Rachel, though certainly not elated by Julia's presence, had been generous with her in small ways. But then Aunt Rachel was her mother's sister by birth. Sybil had married into the family and was no blood relation.

“Mrs. McGinty, what of that girl, Betty?” Lord Eaton's voice drew back her attention.

“She's readying the rooms in the east wing, my lord.”

“Then fetch her, fetch her!”

Julia dropped her gaze, embarrassed she had brought no lady's maid of her own and must rely on Dunraven's staff. It could not be helped. The servants who so faithfully had served her family had had to be dismissed and her home let out.

Returning her attention to Lord Eaton, she found him deep in discussion with Mr. McNab, determining which rooms were to be made available for the new arrivals. Lady Charles quickly requested a room in the east apartments, specifically the one once occupied by her husband. Two rooms on the floor above it were agreed upon for Lord Withrington and Sir Robert.

“What of the Gold Room for Miss Hargrove?”

“Lady Reynolds and her twin daughters are settled there, m' lord.”

“The north wing, then? There are two rooms still unoccupied, I believe.”

“One is without furniture, and the fireplace in the other is unusable, m' lord.”

“Well, what of that chamber in the south tower? That would do nicely. Yes, put Miss Hargrove there.”

“The *south* tower, m'lord?” The butler's thicket of brows raised a full inch.

“It *is* furnished, is it not?” Lord Eaton's tone held a note of irritation at being questioned by the servant.

“But no one sleeps in the south tower,” the butler argued, resisting the notion.

“And why would that be?” Lord Eaton snapped, his face reddening at the butler's continued mulishness.

Mr. McNab shrugged. “Just is, m'lord. Has been since the day I took service with Lord Muir, here at Dunraven.”

“Did my uncle expressly forbid using the south tower?”

“No, m'lord.”

“Then I see no reason to allow the room to stand empty when we are in need of it.” He began to turn away then halted. “Or does my uncle reserve those quarters for his personal use, when he is in residence?”

Julia's ears pricked at the comment, realizing Lord Muir was not present, as she had assumed.

“M'lord is occupying m'lord's chamber,” Mr. McNab informed him somewhat crustily.

Lord Eaton tossed up his hands in exasperation. “Well then, ready the Tower Room. I want Miss Hargrove settled there directly.”

Julia did not miss how the butler and housekeeper exchanged swift glances, nor the darkling looks they now sent her way. She rubbed her forehead, too exhausted to worry over it.

“Very well, m'lord,” Mr. McNab conceded, his voice brusque. “I'll send young Tom to lay in a fire straightway.” At that, he quit the hall, walking at a brisk pace, his kilt switching.

Lord Eaton cinched the belt of his jacket, visibly composing himself. “My apologies. These Highlanders make testy servants. Much less refined than our English ones.”

From the corner of her eye, Julia glimpsed Mrs. McGinty lift her chin and glide from the hall.

In short order, several servants appeared, two proving to be Lord Withrington's and Sir Robert's personal valets. They helped fetch in the luggage, dribbling in additional rain to pool on the flagstones.

Mrs. McGinty returned with a young woman, plump and dark-haired, of an age with Julia. She introduced the maid as Betty Shaw then instructed her to escort Julia to the south tower.

Betty's eyes widened, shifting to Julia. She dropped away her gaze, shielding her surprise, and gave a quick nod.

“Dunraven maintains only a skeletal staff when Lord Muir is not in residence, Miss Hargrove,” Mrs. McGinty informed. “Betty will assist you as best she can manage. However, she must also attend to her other chores. I would ask your patience if she is unable to respond promptly to your summons.”

“Yes, of course,” Julia replied, aware of Betty staring at her once more.

Mrs. McGinty turned to confer with Lady Charles while, at the same time, Lord Withrington and Sir Robert decided to join the other gentlemen in the smoking parlor.

En masse, the group migrated toward the end of the hall. Mrs. McGinty and Lady Charles ascended the grand staircase, the luggage-weighted servants trailing behind. Meantime, the men drifted toward the side corridor after wishing the ladies a pleasant sleep.

Betty lit a small oil lamp and led Julia left of the staircase and toward the back wall. "This way, miss." She continued to the door gaping there like a black, open maw.

A biting chill enveloped Julia as she entered the passage. She rubbed her arms briskly and followed Betty, whose lamp was now throwing shadows onto the walls, huge and misshapen. Tables and chairs lined the way, while scores of stuffed birds peered down from shelves, their jet eyes gleaming.

Diverse corridors led off the main passageway, but the maid conducted Julia the full distance to its end. There it opened onto a dark-paneled vestibule with a shell-headed alcove. Turning right, they arrived at a richly carved staircase.

Their footsteps sounded sharply on the bare wood as they climbed the many stairs. Reaching the top, they bore to the left and entered another passage, this one containing an elaborate display of antiquated pistols and rapiers, glinting menacingly from the walls.

Wearily and cold to the marrow, her every bone aching, Julia relished the thought of sinking into the comfort of a bed, any bed, even one in the abandoned tower chamber.

But why the butler's protests, she wondered? And what of the look he traded with the housekeeper? Betty, too, showed surprise that Julia was to be quartered in the tower. What might she know? Julia studied the back of the maid's dark head, debating whether to raise the matter.

"Betty, there is something that is unclear to me," Julia began in an informal tone. "Mr. McNab indicated the tower chamber is furnished but never used. Is there a reason?"

"Rare it is for Dunraven to have guests, miss," Betty answered obliquely. "Though, several times a year, Lord Muir is in residence with his Society friends."

Julia wondered what society the Scots could possibly enjoy in this remote region. But Lord Muir was an English aristocrat with Scots ties, according to Lady Charles. Likely, his friends trekked north across the border for their gatherings, as those from Braxton did this day. Still shivering with cold, she sympathized with them most sincerely.

"Even when Himself is present, no one sleeps in the tower," Betty chattered on in her musical voice. "'Tis the original and most ancient part of Dunraven. Forgive me to say so, miss, but you must be very special to Lord Eaton for him to lodge you there."

"Lord Eaton?" Julia nearly choked on the notion. "You misunderstand, Betty. There were simply no other rooms available."

Unable to see the maid's face, Julia could not read her reaction. Julia's thoughts returned to the chamber. Perhaps, Lord Muir preserved the room untouched due its great age and history. Whatever his reason, she knew she must be careful to disturb nothing there unduly. Only the bed, which she intended to sink into for at least an aeon or two.

Julia continued to rub warmth into her arms while she took note of their surroundings and attempted to commit their route to mind. At times, she could hear the roar of the storm without. At others, when she and Betty turned back into the bosom of the castle, she could scarce hear any rumblings at all. They now began to climb yet another stairway, this one more ornate than the last.

Gaining the top of the stairs, Betty led Julia through a lavishly embellished portal. Just inside she halted.

"This is the Long Gallery," Betty spoke in a hushed, almost reverent tone. "'Twas once what was called a communicating gallery, something like a cloistered walk, opened but still protected from the elements. It connected the south wing to the tower. In time, the gallery was enclosed and became part of the castle complex. Sometimes, I fancy the people of yesterday walk here still, bustling back and forth with messages for their laird."

Julia lifted a brow at Betty's fanciful imagination, then looked to the wide gallery stretching before them. Gloom devoured the greater portion of it, though windows lined the full length of the right wall.

As the storm bellowed outside, lightning flashed in sporadic intervals, illuminating the sky and flooding the gallery with an eerie blue light. In those piercingly bright moments, Julia could view the expanse before her, filled with overstuffed chairs, small ornate tables, vases and statuary on pedestals. But most startling of all, a vast collection of ancestral portraits covered the wall to her left, rising three tiers high.

Julia stepped closer to Betty as lightning continued to brighten the hall in fits, transmuting the faces of its unsmiling inhabitants, conferring on them sinister aspects. True to the illusion of portraits, every painted eye followed them as they continued along the gallery amid flashes of blue.

At the gallery's end, Betty veered right. In the soft glow of lamplight, Julia saw that the wall to her left was comprised of large, rough-hewn stones.

Again they turned, and Julia began to despair of finding a bed this night. The maze of corridors seemed without end. Curiously, this one led through thick rock, ten feet or more in length. It ended at a planked oaken door where golden light flowed around its edges and escaped beneath its bottom.

Betty pushed open the door fully and crossed the threshold, pausing there as she waited for Julia to follow.

"Here we are, miss. Please come in."

"The south tower?"

"Yes, miss. 'Tis the ancient heart of Dunraven."

Julia hesitated at the portal. It struck her that she stood in no corridor at all, but within the stout defense walls of the keep itself, the entryway cut through its stone.

The heart of Dunraven. The words flowed pleasantly through her. Stepping inside the chamber, she found it handsomely appointed and inviting.

To her right, an expansive fireplace filled the wall, columned and deeply hooded, no less than six feet wide. A cheery fire burned there, filling the room with its distinctive, peaty odor.

A round, gate-legged table stood centered before the hearth, flanked by chairs covered and fringed in pale green velvet, the arm supports and legs gleaming of dark, polished wood. To her left loomed a monstrously large armoire, again of dark wood, paneled and carved. Blue-and-white china jars perched on top.

The room's showpiece, a magnificent canopied bed, occupied the left corner of the far wall. Its solid headboard rose to meet a high, deep crown, the whole of it carved with elaborate foliage and hung with blue trappings.

Persian carpets warmed the floor in blues and cream, while narrow windows with hand-thrown glass and the timbered ceiling overhead added to the chamber's atmosphere.

"Of all the grand rooms in the castle, this is my favorite," declared Betty as she placed the lamp on a side table near the bed and moved to free the window curtains from their ties.

Julia could easily understand Betty's attachment as she continued to glance about, discovering a curious mirror hanging left of the fireplace, small and octagonal, encased in a deep, boxy frame of rosewood.

"The keep itself might be aged, but the furnishings do not appear to be so," Julia observed.

“They are from many different time periods, I am told.” Betty crossed to the bed and folded back the counterpane. “The chairs are from the last century, the armoire from even earlier — Queen Mary Stewart’s time — and the bed, it dates to the fifteenth century.”

Betty ran a hand lovingly over one of the poster’s carved acanthus leaves.

“The piece is original to the room. According to Mr. McNab, who has it on authority from Lord Muir himself, one of the early lairds took a Flemish noblewoman to wife, a widow. She brought the bed with her at the time of her marriage. She liked her fineries, that is known. Some of her personal belongings survive — several gowns, jewelry, and a silver perfume bottle.”

Betty fluffed the pillows. “Of course the trappings are fairly new. Lord Muir refurbished the chamber when he bought Dunraven Castle, so proud he was to bring it back into the family.”

“How is that?” Julia prompted as she moved closer to the toasty warmth of the fire, recalling Lady Charles’s mention of the matter.

“His Scots blood flows through the female line, his maternal grandmother. After the Great Rising of Forty-five, the castle passed out of clan hands. It wasn’t until this century, after the wicked Highland clearances, when so many were cast off the land, that Dunraven came available and Lord Muir made its purchase.”

“And he used it as a hunting seat?” Julia pressed.

“So I’m told, but no more.” Betty looked about the room wistfully. “He cares very much for Dunraven and is partial to the keep in particular. Bless him. By his direction, ’tis my personal duty to care for the tower chamber — see it clean and dusted, the linens kept fresh and all.”

Julia inclined her head, puzzled. “No one stays here, yet the laird instructs you to keep the linens changed?”

“A fine, dear man, our laird, but a bit dottled,” Betty confided.

A shuffling sound drew their attention to the door, where a young man appeared, tall, and sandy-haired, lugging Julia’s trunk.

“It will do there, by the wardrobe, Tom.” Betty pointed to the exact place.

While Betty unpacked Julia’s clothes and hung them in the armoire, Tom brought heated water for the washbasin then transferred the empty traveling chest to the corner nearest the door.

After his departure, Betty helped Julia from her wet clothes and freed her from her stays, a most welcome relief. After seeing to her face and teeth, she slipped into a snowy white nightgown trimmed with violet ribbons and cascades of lace down the front and at the sleeves.

Julia waited by the fire while Betty readied the sheets, sliding a brass warming pan between them, chasing away the chill. Yawning hugely, Julia turned in place to heat her opposite side. Her gaze fell to the hood of the fireplace, and she noticed for the first time an engraved crest bearing a boar’s head — a rather ugly boar’s head — holding the shank of an animal in its mouth. At the same time, the wind and rain battered the windows violently, shaking them in their casements.

Julia shuddered and hugged her arms about her. The Highlands were indeed a wild, inhospitable land.

“The sheets are ready, miss,” Betty advised as she carried the pan to the hearth and emptied its hot contents.

The maid’s words filled Julia’s heart with joy. Climbing into the high bed, she melted into its downy warmth. It felt so-o-o good. Utterly delicious.

“Thank you, Betty.” She smiled at the young woman.

Turning down the lamp, Betty bid Julia a good night and left.

Julia lay quiet a moment and gazed out into the darkened room, listening to the wind and rain lash the windows. The red-gold of the fire provided the room's only source of light, still it was enough to illuminate the furniture directly before it, a portion of the walls, and the timbers overhead.

What was it Emmaline had said? "If only the stones could whisper their secrets, such tales they would tell." She imagined the stones of this room could tell many tales. Now, in a way, she, too, was a part of its history.

She smiled groggily at the thought, then dismissed it, turning into her pillow. She had caught a touch of Emmaline's "fever." Too much talk of ancient keeps and chieftains.

She nestled into the mattress, her eyes drifting shut, and sank into blissful oblivion.

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Dunraven Castle, September, 1437

Rae Mackinnon, Third Laird of Dunraven Castle, quit the hall and climbed the spiraling stairwell to his bedchamber. It had been a devil of a night, and his mood was black — black as the moonless sky and as turbulent as the storm that raged without.

'Twas vexing enough that Dunraven burgeoned with contentious guests, and new arrivals were expected on the morrow, he fumed. But, now, cattle had been reived from beneath the clan's nose on this most wretched of nights.

He'd led his men out to assess the loss and reinforce the guard. The deed had the markings of more than simple thieving. It reeked of a trap, he swore it. But his brother, Iain, would not be convinced. Despite the fiendish weather, Iain had insisted they give pursuit, then quarreled with him openly before the others when Rae ordered the men back to Dunraven.

Rae vented a few choice expletives as he managed the narrow steps. Pushing open his chamber door, he strode past the ornate bed and halted before the great fireplace that consumed much of the wall to his left. The weariness and disgust escaped him in a sigh as he stared into the flames.

His gaze lifted to the engraving on the deep fireplace hood — the head of a surly boar with a sheep shank in its jaws. Rae's lips drew into a grim smile. He felt as snarly as the animal looked.

An ear-splitting crack of thunder wrenched his attention to the shuttered windows. What a night to be out chasing down reivers. Did Iain really think they could find the thieves in this brawl?

Rae scrubbed a hand over his face, then worked the kinks from his shoulder muscles. Pulling over a chair, he braced his foot on the seat and unlaced his brogues, then set them aside. He next removed his dirk and scabbard from his belt, then the wide leather belt itself. Unfastening his shoulder pin, he let his plaid drop to the floor and drew off his shirt. Folding it and the many yards of plaid, he placed them on the nearby trunk and stood naked before the fire. Naked except for the charm stone suspended on a silver chain about his neck.

Och, but the fire felt good. He tilted his head back and savored the intense, dry heat of the flames. Let the others continue their arguments below, guttered in their cups, he thought. He longed for the comfort of bed and a decent night's sleep.

His mind bent once more to the squall without. *Dhia*, but the weather had turned savage this night, bolts of lightning dropping all around as he and his men returned. As they rode for the safety of the castle, the sky suddenly exploded in a spectacle of light, a great withered hand streaking earthward from the sky, clutching for the great tower itself. Clutching for him, or so it seemed.

Rae touched the charm stone that lay on his chest, recalling the *cailleach's* warning to not remove its protective power from his neck. The old woman's warnings still unsettled him, not that he understood her ramblings, but had she foreseen this night? Had the stone guarded him in some wise?

On entering the hall, he'd hoped to retire straight to his room but Malcolm MacChlerich and several of Dunraven's other guests delayed him. He joined them in several rounds of *uisge beatha* as they thrashed out the particulars of the night's raid, postulating who the culprits might be. Thankfully, Iain saw fit to keep his tongue in his head and not challenge his authority as laird again.

The discussion moved on to other such matters as the recent gathering of Highland chiefs, and the "detainment" of the Dowager Queen and the wee king at Stirling Castle. Rae saw dire portents there, but his companions expressed only moderate interest in the current drama of the crown.

He left the lot of them deep in their cups and arguments and sought his chamber. Thankfully, Moira, Malcolm MacChlerich's daughter, had retired earlier to her chamber, and Rae escaped her fawning attentions. Moira's interest in him was unmistakable, as was that of her father in seeing their clans joined. The tall and shapely blonde had accompanied her father to Dunraven a week past, and since then, endeavored to impress Rae, being ever near, ever solicitous. If that were not enough, Malcolm embroiled Iain with his own fiery views, agitating his brother's passions which ever sought the answer to all ills in cold steel.

Ah, Iain. Would they ne'er see eye to eye? And Donald, a keen young man but easily swayed. This youngest brother, so soon to marry, must learn to trust his instincts where others would bend him to their narrow cause.

Rae rubbed his eyes, bone weary. The Macphersons would arrive early in the day to finalize the details of Donald's marriage to their sister, Mairi, and the terms of her *tocher*. Rae had agreed to meet with Donald at dawn to make their own preparations.

Though Rae held some concern over an alliance between their clans, he believed Donald to be a lucky man. He'd not only won himself a bonnie bride, but the two were quite genuinely and deeply in love.

Aware he could now catch only a precious few hours of sleep, Rae headed for the bed, a luxurious piece, skillfully carved with acanthus leaves and draped with scarlet trappings.

As he approached the bed, he felt a weightiness to the air and a slight wave of dizziness crest through him. 'Twas as if the room had suddenly moved and he did not. He thrust a hand through his hair. Surely, he hadn't imbibed that much of the *uisge beatha*.

Rae reached for the covers and began to climb abed when he spied a feminine contour outlined by the blankets, and a woman's bright hair flowing over the pillow like a river of gold.

He snatched back his hand and stared, startled to find a woman there, one who apparently awaited his companionship. His eyes narrowed over the sleeping figure as he gleaned the deception that passed here.

"Moira," he growled.

So this was her scheme to trap him into marriage. Likely her father was part to the ruse, making his way up the steps this very moment for an unannounced, late-night "chat." Och, but the two were of a kind, plotting to ensnare him well.

Not wasting a moment, Rae seized hold of the woman and yanked her from his bed. Sly lass. She'd not play him for a fool.

Slipping an arm beneath her legs, he caught her up and held her firm against his chest. She came fully awake at that, if ever truly she slept. The lass yelped and writhed, but he gripped her all the tighter and strode with her straight to the door, harboring not a drop of sympathy.

“Oot wi' ye, hoor,” he snarled.

Yanking open the door, he took a single step outside the chamber, deposited the lass on the stairwell, then fell back a pace across the threshold and slammed the door.

“Fashionous wench,” he muttered, heading back to the bed. It dimly registered that the lass wore a long shapeless gown, frilled with ribbons and lace.

“Damn odd,” he muttered again, flipping back the blankets and climbing abed.

Why would she wear such finery? And since when did a body wear clothes to bed? Of course, if she purposed only to entrap him, she might have plotted to do so without losing her virginity. Her father's timely appearance would have forestalled that.

Rae turned into the pillow and breathed the floral scent that clung to the linen casing. 'Twas the lass's fragrance. He'd breathed its sweetness in her hair as he carried her across the room. Strange, but it wasn't a scent he recognized as Moira's. And was it his imagination, or did the lass seem to stand to a shorter height, and her hair seem brighter than Moira's and without its reddish cast?

Rae rolled over and faced the wall, dismissing the lass and the incident from his mind. He'd not trouble himself to rise and take a closer look. No female would get away with such underhanded trickery. If a lass warmed his bed, 'twould be because he himself invited her there.

With that, he burrowed into the pillow and mattress, aware of the lingering warmth and floral scent pervading the linens. Grumbling, he flipped the pillow over, punched it into shape, and burrowed in once more. Surely, it had been the very devil of a day.

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Julia tottered on the stone landing, its icy cold stinging the soles of her bare feet. Stunned and disoriented, she gaped through the tangled curtain of her hair.

Julia's eyes rounded saucer-wide as she caught sight of a tall, barbarous-looking man, shockingly naked, his dark sable hair flowing to his shoulders and his piercing blue eyes hardened with anger.

Julia stared speechless, too startled to withdraw her gaze from the sight of such raw masculinity. The man spoke not a word, but withdrew into the bedchamber and slammed shut the door.

Cheeks flaming and utterly aghast, Julia gasped rapid breaths, her heart pounding. Her gaze remained riveted to the door, and she questioned whether she saw what she thought she saw.

Her brows bunched together. Did her eyes play her a trick? The door was arched and its planks scored and studded with nails creating a diamond pattern.

Julia dragged her hair from her face and looked about her, turning in place. She found herself standing in the confines of a stone stairwell. A torch blazed in its bracket several steps below, its pitch popping and hissing as the flames' shadows danced upon the wall.

From belowstairs rose the sound of boisterous male voices — voices that spoke a strange melodic tongue and sounded suspiciously sottish. Julia wondered if they, too, were guests of Lord Eaton, local inhabitants, perhaps. Possibly, the intruder mistook her chamber for his own or presumed it empty. Still, why the rude eviction?

An unsettling feeling twined through Julia as she realized she stood enclosed in the thick wall of the keep. But where?

Dash it all, think, Julia commanded herself, her nerves fraying. She had been fast asleep when she heard the roar of a deep male voice. Hands like bands of steel clamped about her arms and hauled her from the bed. In the next instant, arms caught her up, rock hard, and she found her cheek pressed against warm flesh — the very solid, well-muscled chest of the intruder.

But there was something amiss about the direction. He carried her toward the wall to the right of the bed and passed through it! No, she corrected, he passed through a door, *this* door with its arch and nail studs. But, from where did it come?

Her feet smarting with cold, Julia shifted from one to the other and hugged herself against the chill air. Plainly, she could not remain in the stairwell the rest of the night catching her death. Dare she descend the steps, garbed in her thin nightgown, and risk discovery and possible violation by the men gathered below? Or should she reenter the chamber and brave the one?

Plucking up her courage, she shoved open the door and stepped inside the chamber, braced to confront the naked stranger and, if necessary, make a dash for the opposite door.

Julia halted, her jaw dropping wide as her gaze fastened on the bed, its trappings scarlet red. Hesitantly, she forced her gaze around the room. An iron-bound trunk occupied the wall where the massive armoire should have been, and the gateleg table and velvet chairs had disappeared from sight.

Of a sudden, an oppressive heaviness filled the air. Julia lowered her head to her hands, pain shooting through her temples. A moment later, the sensation passed.

Julia looked up, searching for sign of the intruder. Astonishingly, all in the room appeared as before — the bed trappings blue instead of red, the armoire in its place, and carpet soft beneath her toes. The fire that burned brightly moments before was now glowing coals.

Julia twisted around. The door through which she just passed had vanished without a trace!

Chapter 3

Julia stirred from the depths of her slumber, coming slowly aware of the toasty warmth that enveloped her. She smiled at the delicious sensation and stretched out, feeling liquid as honey on a hot summer's day.

Julia's lashes flew open and she bolted upright. Scrambling back, she pressed against the ornate headboard and yanked the blankets with her, covering her chest. Frantically, she scanned the bed for the naked intruder of the night past, fearing he was the source of her warmth.

The bedcovers lay flat though rumpled before her. Not wholly reassured, Julia leaned forward and swatted down the fabric, then jerked the sheets upward and peered beneath. Dropping them, she crawled to the end of the bed, flicked aside the bed hangings, and darted a glance around the room.

The chamber appeared vacant, save for herself. Still, Julia's heart beat an erratic tattoo. What of the stranger? How had he gained entrance? And where was he now?

Alarm struck Julia. Swinging her legs to the floor, she dropped to her knees and made a hasty inspection beneath the bed. She found herself staring at bare floorboards, unmasking not even a ball of dust.

Rising to her feet, she turned a full circle, her gaze skimming over the walls and furniture. Had she dreamt the whole bizarre episode? Yet the details were so vivid, so palpable.

Even now, her senses tingled with the memories — the strength and heat of the man's body as he held her fast, the pounding of his heart beneath her ear, his manly scent, the furious look in his eyes as he cast her from the room and she glimpsed his unclad form.

Julia's face burned at the memory, his hard-muscled body shockingly magnificent, illuminated in the fire's glow. She took a long swallow, struggling to suppress the image. What hidden, shameless part of her could have conjured such a man?

A wave of fatigue crested through Julia, overcoming her. She sank onto the nearest chair, feeling suddenly and inexplicably sapped of all energy. Smoothing a hand over her face, she drew back her tumble of hair. The arduous journey and disrupted night's sleep were exacting their toll, she told herself. Yet, a lassitude spread through her bones, unlike anything she had known before.

A dream. It had only been a *dream*, she insisted silently. No doubt, the unfamiliar surroundings and the violent storm had brought it on. Then, too, her head had been filled with talk of shadowy secrets enshrouding Dunraven, and of Emmaline's castles and chieftains of times gone by. Clearly, the day's excitements had fired her imagination, only to emerge later, during her sleep, in the form of a graphic dream.

Julia's spirits lifted at her swift and logical deduction. She shut the incident from her mind, holding no wish to examine it closer or consider why her subconscious would bring a wild and naked Scotsman to life in her bedchamber.

Her gaze traveled over the antiquated room and furnishings. Sleeping alone in a chamber such as this would dispose anyone to dreams, she assured herself. And yet . . .

What if the man *had* been real? What if, during Lord Muir's prolonged absences, someone else resided in Dunraven — whether beknown or unbeknown to the laird? Someone who occupied this very room and accessed it by means of a hidden passage. As far-fetched as it seemed, it would explain the butler's protests last night and the maid's instructions to keep the chamber in readiness for guests who never arrived.

Fresh energy swirled through Julia. Rising on unsteady feet, she crossed to the wall opposite, right of the bed. She studied the stones for evidence of a seam, a secret door. With walls ten or more feet thick, they could easily conceal passageways, even small rooms.

Finding nothing of note, she moved to the fireplace and searched the bricks and sculptured mantel. Pushing, pulling, prodding, and twisting, she sought a mechanism to trigger a false panel. Even should the entire wall somehow open before her, she realized it would not explain the appearance or disappearance of the furniture last night, or how the bed hangings changed their color from blue to red.

Meeting no more success with the fireplace than with the wall, Julia directed her attention to the massive armoire. Standing before it, she flung open the doors and shoved aside the clothes.

The back panels stared out at her. Cautiously, Julia climbed inside the wardrobe, anticipation shivering along her spine. She rapped on the boards and listened for a telling, hollow sound. Methodically, she continued to knock across the panels, bending closer, her ear intent on every note and vibration.

“Might I be of assistance, miss?”

Julia shot upright, a cry escaping her as she stumbled backward and nearly fell out of the wardrobe. Regaining herself, she managed to step out with a modicum of decorum and without further mishap. Heat blossomed in her cheeks.

“Good morning, Betty.” Her voice wavered with forced brightness.

Betty quirked her head and peered inside the armoire at the disarray of clothes.

“I, er, dropped something . . . in the armoire . . . My ring.” Julia offered quickly, holding up her hand to display the elegant band and its unusual quartz stone. “But I found it. See?”

Julia winced at the lie which sprang so easily to her lips. Yet, how could she confess to the object of her quest — a hidden panel through which a naked stranger had materialized in her chamber?

“The ring was my mother's,” she added truthfully, seeing Betty's perplexed look.

Comprehension touched the young woman's eyes, followed by a melting look of compassion. “And she's gone now, is she?” Julia nodded. “Poor lamb, of course you would be fetching the ring from the closet. I would have torn it apart m'self. Do not worry over the gowns. I'll see to them straightway.”

Betty moved off, taking up the pitcher of heated water and towels she had left on the table and filling a flowered porcelain bowl in the washstand. Wordlessly, she set out scented soap, then bustled to the windows and drew back the curtains. Buttery light spilled in.

Julia stared at the mullioned windows. Had there been shutters there last night, rattling against the wind?

“‘Tis a fine, bonnie day,” Betty cheered, moving off to fluff the pillows and tidy the bed.

“Yes. Yes it is,” Julia said absently, culling her memory for images of the shutters, but could find none. She looked again to the windows and noted the height of the sun. “It is much later than I expected,” she sighed, discovering the morning to be half spent. She turned toward the bed, but the maid was not in sight.

“The sleep did you good, for certain.” Betty's muffled voice came from the armoire, the front half of her lost in its depths as she neatened the gowns.

Julia wrapped her arms about herself, uncertain any good had come from the unsettling night.

After cleansing herself at the basin, Julia began the ritual of dressing, donning her silk combination — a snug-fitting union of chemise and drawers. Betty next cinched her into her

corset, over which flowed a camisole and two petticoats, all lavished with embroidery, tucks, ribbons, and lace. Cotton stockings completed the requisite undergarments.

At Betty's insistence, she slipped into a dressing sacque to ward off the room's chill, then allowed the maid to dress her hair. As Julia sat under Betty's ministrations, she turned vexing questions over in her mind, wondering if she might pose them to Betty without revealing too much or rousing her suspicions.

"I am curious, Betty," she began with a collectedness she did not feel. "Are there any stories that survive about the keep? Or this room, perhaps? Anything unusual?"

"Unusual, miss? In what way?" Betty drew the brush through her hair in long, rhythmic strokes.

"The tower is centuries old. Do you think, for instance, it might conceal a hidden passageway?"

Betty's hand stilled, then she chuckled and resumed her brushing. "Not likely, miss, though Dunraven does lend itself to such notions on stormy nights."

Julia smiled at her gentle teasing.

"But no," Betty continued. "I've heard no tales of the like. The tower is a simple block affair, massive stones, piled straight up. If hidden stairs and hallways exist in Dunraven, they are more likely located in the newer additions — designed into the wings at the time of their constructions, do you see?"

Betty worked Julia's hair into a thick chignon at the back of her head and secured it with pins and a decorative comb, topped with faux pearls.

"Dunraven is the result of centuries of amendments and improvements, miss. But passages in the tower?" Betty shrugged. "I'd think it unlikely, but Mr. McNab might know. He has been in service here the longest of any of us."

Betty moved to stand in front of Julia as she styled the soft fringe of curls framing her face.

Julia opened her mouth to reply then closed it. She held little desire to speak with the irascible Scotsman. And after all, there was no need. What she experienced during the night was a bad dream, that and no more. Secret passages, indeed. She must be balmy to consider it.

Choosing a morning dress of changeable silk, she rid herself of the dressing sacque and drew it on. Betty gushed over the gown's details — the multicolored stripes of rose, green, and brown, and the lacy "Vandykes," points of snowy Irish lace running in double rows down the bodice and edging the cuffs.

In truth, the style was a year out of date, the skirt being narrower than this season's and the upper sleeves not as full above the elbow. Such vanities mattered little anymore, Julia reflected with a heavy sigh. The darkness of her loss loomed unexpectedly, squeezing her heart.

Julia consulted her pocket watch for the time, then slipped it inside her belt. If she accomplished nothing more this day, she must pen her letter to her grandmother and post it. She needed to be away from this place. Away in Hampshire where she might do something useful with her life. Away from Dunraven Castle and its provocative, heart-stopping dreams.

Departing the chamber, Julia followed Betty, impressing their route to mind so she might later find her way back without becoming hopelessly lost.

Entering the Long Gallery, she found it to be quite handsome in daylight and the portraits not nearly so sinister. Julia slowed her steps, perusing the faces there. None resembled the man in her bedchamber, leastwise, not with their clothes on.

Julia stiffened, shocked by the wayward turn of her thoughts. Suddenly his memory surrounded her — the feel of his hard torso as he held her in his arms, the warmth of his bare

flesh, the piercing blue of his eyes. Julia shook away her wanton imaginings, ignoring the shimmer of heat that passed through her.

“Are you all right, miss?” Concern filled Betty's voice.

“Yes, perfectly. But I could really do with a strong cup of tea.”

Long minutes later, retracing their steps of the previous night, they arrived in the entrance hall. Betty conducted Julia to the breakfast room, then disappeared to inform Cook of her presence.

Julia found the room to be snug and welcoming, warmed with rich oak paneling. Paintings adorned the walls, depicting popular sporting themes — salmon fishing in the icy lochs, still lifes of game birds, and hunters bringing home stags on sturdy Highland ponies.

Julia turned her gaze upward and was surprised to see that elaborate plasterwork embellished the ceiling overhead, in complete contrast to the room's solid, masculine furnishings.

Despite the coziness of the room, there was an unnatural quiet. Though their party from Braxton had descended upon Dunraven the night before, no one seemed to be about this morning. Indeed the castle seemed strangely empty.

Julia drifted her gaze over the fine oils as she moved around the confines of the room, then stopped before a series of etchings grouped near the fireplace. Each portrayed Dunraven Castle from one of eight different vantages. She examined them closely, striving to comprehend the layout of the castle.

Hearing a soft footfall and the rustle of material, Julia turned to find Mrs. McGinty entering the room with a porcelain tea service.

“Good morning, miss,” the housekeeper greeted crisply, a slight chill to her tone. She placed the service on the sideboard, made several small but precise adjustments, then faced Julia, unsmiling. “Our breakfast hour is past, but Cook will prepare fresh porridge if it pleases you.”

Julia perceived the trace of disapproval in Mrs. McGinty's eyes but could not account for it.

“Thank you, but there's no need to trouble Cook. The tea will be quite satisfactory.”

Mrs. McGinty turned to leave but Julia delayed her.

“Is Mr. McNab nearby? I should like to ask him some questions about Dunraven's history.”

Mrs. McGinty gave an indelicate snort, at odds with her taciturn manner. “Mr. McNab led the gentlemen out early this morning for deerstalking. I'd not be expecting them back for many an hour.”

Julia's brows creased in confusion. “I thought he was the butler, not a gillie.”

“Mr. McNab is many things.”

An awkward silence followed.

“Can you tell me if my aunt, Lady Symington, is about? Or my cousins? I have yet to see any of the ladies from Braxton. The castle appears quite abandoned.”

“The ladies departed a short time ago for an afternoon's outing and picnic. They are not journeying far, only a few miles to visit the Falls of Glendar.”

A brief pause hung between them as Julia absorbed this news. Mrs. McGinty clasped her hands before her with a shade of impatience. “Will that be all, miss?”

“Yes, thank you.” Julia watched Mrs. McGinty's stiff withdrawal, wondering whether the animosity she sensed in the woman was real or imagined.

Julia poured herself a steaming cup of tea at the sideboard then carried it to the double door that opened onto an adjoining room. There she found a cheerful parlor with sunlight spilling in through tall, full-length bay windows. Bright patterned chintz enlivened the furniture and draperies while book-lined shelves climbed the far wall.

Julia crossed to the handsome mahogany desk that stood before the nearest bay. She should have thought to ask the housekeeper for pen and stationery, she chided herself, feeling the need to begin her letter to Lady Arabella.

Julia set her saucer and cup on the desk and reached for the top drawer, hoping to find writing materials. Her hand stilled as she glanced out the window, her thoughts diverting to the ladies down the road, in particular to her aunt.

Had she misunderstood Aunt Sybil's intentions last night? Did her aunt truly mean to separate her from herself and her cousins for the duration of their stay at Dunraven, or for just the one night?

Julia sipped her tea as she recalled fragments of her conversation with Lord Eaton. Did she misread his explanation for lodging her apart of the others? Were the sentiments he conveyed truly her aunt's, or his own perhaps? And what of Lord Eaton's insistence on billeting her in the tower over Mr. McNab's protests? Julia cared not at all for the look the butler sent her before quitting the hall.

Pulling herself from her thoughts, Julia gazed out at the rain-rinsed skies and imposing mountains. They beckoned to her. Too distracted to write and seized by an urgent need to find her aunt and settle these questions, she decided to ride out. Being a reasonably adept horsewoman, Julia felt confident she could catch up with the group, provided a mount was available.

Julia rang for Mrs. McGinty, pulling the silken cord that hung by the door. No doubt, the woman would be unhappy with the interruption. So be it, Julia set her jaw and rang again.

Mrs. McGinty appeared directly. Julia's request brought a look of surprise to her carefully controlled features, but she stated she would send young Tom, Cook's son, to ready a horse. He could also be spared to serve as her guide.

"I shall need Betty's assistance just long enough to change," Julia called over her shoulder as she quickened past the housekeeper and left the parlor.

Julia hastened to her room, and despite a few wrong turns, arrived there presently, her determination overriding her hesitation to return alone.

Still, Julia paused on the threshold and ran a glance around the room before entering. Assured it stood vacant, she directed her footsteps toward the armoire, and ignored a keen urge to drop to her knees and peer underneath the bed.

Drawing open the wardrobe doors, she located her riding costume. No sooner did she lay out the articles than Betty arrived, much to Julia's relief.

Betty's eyes widened at the sight of Julia's garments spread on the bed. "How very grand," Betty exclaimed, slightly out of breath for having hurried. "Do you ride to the hounds then?"

Julia shook her head. "Only for pleasure. Rather, I used to ride in Hampshire." *With my parents*, she added silently. She rode at Gramercy as well, trying to escape her pain. But today she would ride for pleasure once more, this time in the wild Highlands.

Betty assisted Julia out of her gown then into her habit, beginning with the chamois trousers. The skirt followed, the cloth being a deep, ultramarine blue. Next came the basque, a close-fitting jacket of the same color, waist-length, with a single row of buttons, long tight sleeves, and a short tail at the back. High-topped boots added polish to the outfit.

"Ah, 'tis very smart, miss. Very smart indeed." Betty beamed as she handed Julia her high-crowned beaver hat.

Julia fixed the hat in place, then accepted her gloves from the maid and accompanied her out of the chamber. As they reached the gallery, Julia halted.

“Oh, bother. I've forgotten my riding crop. Do go on, Betty. I've delayed you from your duties long enough. I'll pop back and fetch it.”

“Very good, miss, if you're sure.”

Julia nodded and returned to the bedchamber. Reentering, she moved briskly to the armoire and rummaged inside for her riding crop. In the process, she dislodged her hat and mussed her hair.

“Drat,” Julia muttered, abandoning the wardrobe for the room's small, octagonal mirror.

She smoothed her hair back in place then repositioned her hat. Suddenly, the air altered, growing weighty and pressing down on her. The hat toppled from her fingers, and she cupped her forehead in her palms.

Julia's heart raced. She straightened slowly and rounded in place, then sucked in her breath. The space was bare before her, devoid of table, chairs, and carpeting. An iron-bound trunk lined the wall, the armoire having vanished once more. To her dismay, shutters now bracketed the windows — windows no longer fitted with glass.

Julia started toward the door through which she had just entered, thinking to escape. But it, too, had disappeared. Spinning around, her gaze fell across the room. To the right of the bed waited the studded arched door, partially opened.

A chill shivered over her skin.

“A dream. This is a dream,” Julia uttered aloud, failing to convince herself.

She took a shaky step toward the bed and caught the draperies between her fingers. Her heart dipped as she stroked their texture. They were real, tangible, but God help her, the cloth was red instead of blue.

Julia stepped apart of the bed and swept her hand through the space the table had occupied moments ago. She gave a small cry, catching nothing in her palm but air.

Julia clamped down on her fears and moved toward the arched door with an overpowering need to know what lay on the other side. Her hand shaking violently, she dragged the door open fully and passed through the portal.

Julia found herself on the remembered stairwell, all appearing exactly as it had in her “dream.” The low murmur of voices rose from below. But this time they sounded neither loud nor boisterous. In truth, she distinguished female voices among them, and children's as well.

Wary, but immensely curious, Julia started down the narrow spiral of stairs, forcing her feet down one step, then another, her heart beating high in her throat.

Narrow slits pierced the thick wall at intervals, admitting in light to softly wash the stairs. The acrid smell of spent torches assaulted her nostrils, but as she neared the bottom, it mixed with the peaty odors of cooking fires and that of broth and meat.

The steps ended in a sheltered alcove which, in turn, opened directly into an expansive hall. Julia's thoughts scrambled to recall the castle etchings, unable to place this extension.

Shoring up her courage, Julia stepped from the shadows of the alcove, moving just inside the hall. There, people bustled and scurried about, engaged in various tasks. Their clothing struck her as somehow out of place, out of time — the men garbed in voluminous kilts of an era long past, the colors muted. The women, for the most part, wore skirts to their ankles over plain blouses, some with plaid shawls. One woman, tall and blond, wore a surprisingly elegant gown, moss green in color with contrasting sleeves of gold. But it, too, seemed sorely out of date.

As Julia puzzled the scene, her gaze came to rest on a tall figure across the hall — a man with sable locks flowing to his shoulders and with piercing blue eyes. He stood in conversation,

his leg cocked on a bench, his arm braced there, a cup in his hand. He, too, wore the old-style kilt. And he wore it well, she observed, warmth sliding through her.

Someone shouted to Julia's right. The man across the room looked up and flashed a smile, tossing back a rejoinder in his Gaelic tongue at what was evidently a jest. As he drew his gaze from the other man, it settled on Julia. His features froze, his eyes locking with hers.

Fear and fire swarmed through Julia. Slowly, the man straightened, setting aside his cup and lowering his leg to the floor. His gaze swept downward over her breasts and clear to her toes, taking in the details of her attire. As his eyes returned to hers, a frown creased his forehead as if in troubled thought.

He abandoned his companions and began toward her, riveting her with his piercing blue gaze. His companions fell silent around him and turned to see what so captured his interest. They stared in Julia's direction but finding nothing remarkable, returned to their cups.

The tall Scotsman continued across the hall, his long strides rapidly closing the space. A movement caught the corner of Julia's vision and the blonde in the moss green gown stepped into view. She raised her hand toward the man, but he paid her no heed, continuing straight toward Julia.

Julia's pulses spun. How strikingly handsome he was, his features regular and pleasing — the nose straight, the lips well defined, the jaw square-cut. His shoulders were broader than she first had realized and as he strode forward, she could well envision his powerful body moving beneath his garments.

Julia felt boneless under the intensity of his gaze. He closed the distance between them and reached for her. In that same instant, a wave of dizziness assaulted her, the air compressing and crushing down on her. The room, and the Scotsman, swam before her eyes and she feared she would faint.

As her knees dissolved beneath her, Julia put out her hand to break her fall. The stone floor rushed up in a blur. But, seconds later, as she crumpled completely, it was not stone that met her hands, but grass.

Opening her eyes, Julia discovered herself sprawled on the grounds outside the castle, looking back up at the ancient keep.

Chapter 4

Julia rose on quivery legs. What madness was this? Some demented dream? A hallucination? Yet here she stood, outside Dunraven's ancient keep.

She eyed the tower's solid stone face. Was she to believe she had passed through rock?

Julia examined the ground about her, a tangle of weeds where the hall and the Scotsman had stood moments before. Still she could feel the touch of his hand, his fingers encircling her arm even as he disappeared.

Julia massaged her forehead. Perhaps she was deranged, the strain of this past year snapping her sanity. Certainly, should she tell anyone of these occurrences, they would believe it to be so and commit her straight away.

Julia paced the ground, her nerves in a boil. Spying fragments of a low wall nearby, she went to examine it. The ruin ran in a straight line, perpendicular to one side of the tower, sheltering a small explosion of rich pink primroses.

A shiver tingled through Julia as she realized the wall's location approximated that of the chimerical hall. Crouching down, she traced her hand over the stonework, the surfaces dressed and regular, the stones of a size similar to those in the tower. A foundation perhaps, or remnants of a larger structure?

Julia drew back the border of dainty primroses and yellow-green foliage to better examine the wall. Curiously, the lower, more protected surfaces appeared blackened in areas.

Julia rose to her feet with more questions than before. She took several steps toward the tower and tipped back her head, her gaze scaling its height. Narrow slit-like windows punctuated the wall, rising in a pattern that would match the remembered stairwell.

Roaming the keep's southward side, she spied the windows to her room, their glass flashing with sunlight. But another pair likewise glinted some yards higher, betraying a room directly above her own. Had the stairwell spiraled upward, she wondered uneasily? She could not remember, though it seemed likely and the slitted windows indicated as much, reaching nearly to the roof.

Julia continued to inspect the tower grounds until young Tom appeared, leading a sturdy Scots pony, saddled and ready for her to ride. When she informed him she no longer wished to join the other ladies but requested sketching materials instead, he looked visibly disappointed. It could not be helped, and she apologized for his troubles. Good fellow that he was, Tom uttered no complaint but led the pony away, fetched the requested supplies, and returned to his chores.

Plucking up her nerve and her spirit, Julia set out. The same insatiable curiosity that first had prompted her to investigate the tower stairwell now drove her over Dunraven's grounds to find the answers she required. She'd make her own sketches, she decided. She'd record her findings and compare them with the etchings in the breakfast parlor.

For hours, Julia explored the surrounding property, rendering views of the castle, primarily those nearest the keep. On one, she roughed in the placement of the alcove's portal where it had opened onto the hall. She also sketched the hall's interior as she remembered it, detailing the people at their activities and capturing the essence of their dated garments. Though Julia considered herself less than gifted at rendering people, there could be no mistaking the tall Scotsman staring out from the heart of her drawing.

The hours slipped past. Even when the women returned from their excursion, and later still when Betty appeared and announced tea, Julia remained out-of-doors with her papers and pencil.

She made her excuses and lingered for a time, walking restlessly over the grounds, having little desire to enter a castle which might cough her back out at any given moment.

“Little wonder no one has hunted here for twenty years,” Julia mumbled to herself as she trod on. Had not Lord Withrington claimed there to be something “hidden” about Dunraven?

“Hidden indeed.” She blew a wisp of hair from her eyes. “Hidden in my bedchamber!”

Julia's thoughts turned to Lord Eaton and the querulous butler, Angus McNab. Where the one had insisted on lodging her in the tower, the other had opposed it, each with matching vigor.

Whatever their motives — whatever they knew or did not know of the tower's irregularities — they'd best agree upon other quarters for her, preferably on the furthest end of the castle complex. She simply could not, *would* not stay another night in the ancient keep!

The sun slung low over the mountains. As the temperature dropped, Julia's constant motion warmed her but marginally. The cold nipped at her nose, stiffened her cheeks, and numbed her fingers and toes. Still, she found the clean Highland air marvelously invigorating.

Julia tarried as long as she might, intent on intercepting Lord Eaton on his arrival. But when dusk gathered and still the men did not return, she relented. Teeth chattering, she headed for the front of the castle and its main entrance, unable to endure the falling temperatures a moment longer.

No sooner did she round the west end, than the hunting party appeared amid a frenzy of excitement. Shouts rang out, clamoring for the servants to fetch a physician. Julia rushed forward as several men lifted Lord Eaton down from his horse, his face grimaced in pain. A commotion surrounded Lord Withrington as well, and she spied blood smearing his jacket.

Julia followed the troupe into the entrance hall where Lord Eaton's bearers eased him onto a chair. Simultaneously, the ladies poured forth from a side parlor and besieged the men with their attentions and concern.

When one of the men attempted to remove Lord Eaton's boot, he bellowed in pain. Lilith, Aunt Sybil, and a half dozen other ladies moved immediately to console him.

“Don't worry overmuch,” Julia heard Sir Robert to say as she joined Emmaline. “It's no more than a twisted ankle. He'll recover after a hot soak and a night's rest.”

Was there a tinge of annoyance in his tone? Julia looked again to where the women hovered over Lord Eaton. He groaned full-throated as Mr. McNab now pried the boot from his foot. The ladies sent up small gasps, fluttering about him like a cloud of anxious butterflies. His mask of pain slackened ever so briefly as he slid an appreciative glance over the swell of bosoms poised above him.

Julia's sympathies withered. “What of Lord Withrington, is he hurt?” she asked of Sir Robert, turning toward the older man and noting that he garnered far less concern though his clothes were bloodied.

“Quite sound, quite sound,” chirped Mr. Sampson Dilcox at her elbow, one of their company from Braxton, an energetic little man of great charm and little hair. “But he and Sir Robert are quite the heroes of the day. They captured the day's take after it ran off, don't you know? The ponies, that is — they ran off with the deer carcasses strapped to them.” He stopped himself with a twittery laugh. “Forgive me, Miss Hargrove. I do get ahead of myself.”

“Damned fool!” Lord Withrington groused to Lady Charles as Julia and her companions joined them. “Eaton nearly took off my head.”

Julia and Emmaline turned rounded eyes to Sir Robert, who nodded grimly.

“Our host was handing off his gun—”

“Handed it off pointed and loaded, without a gnat's sense of safety,” grumbled Lord Withrington.

“Yes, well . . .” Sir Robert cleared his throat. “As he handed it off, he tripped over an outcropping of rock.”

“The lead shot right over my shoulder, grazed my whiskers!” Lord Withrington declared while Lady Charles patted him with a calming hand.

“Thankfully, no one was hurt.” Sampson picked up the story. “But the blast startled the garrons — that's the Scots ponies — and they ran off, stags and all.”

“But what of the blood on your jacket?” Julia looked to Lord Withrington.

“Deer blood. When we caught up with the garrons, some of the stags had come loose. Had to secure them. Fine job of catching the beasts — the garrons, that is.” He gave an appreciative nod to Sir Robert. “And you, Sampson. Obligated for what you did pacifying them and leading them back.”

He gave the smaller man's back an open-handed clout. Sampson flushed with pride and stole a nervous glance toward Julia.

Lady Charles turned her attentions to Julia. “My dear, you are positively waxen.” She felt Julia's cheeks and took her hands in her own. “You stayed out far too long, dear. You're like an icicle. Come along, we must thaw you out before you catch your death. Perhaps Cook can prepare a Highland remedy to ward off your chills.”

Mr. McNab, rather than Cook, prepared his “antidote for all ills” before the fire, a steaming mixture of sugar, lemon juice, boiling water and a double measure of whiskey from Dunraven's private stock. The “Highland toddy” instantly diffused heat to Julia's nether parts, warming her blood and radiating a decided glow through her very being.

Cook held supper while the belated hunters completed the day's rituals, downing a bracing shot of whiskey, followed by a long, soaking bath. The women likewise retired to their rooms to dress and ornament themselves for dinner.

Unable to avoid the moment, Julia accompanied Betty to her bedchamber to exchange her riding frock for more appropriate attire. Impatient to leave, her nerves a mass of knots, she asked Betty to select something for her.

The maid chose a gown of pale peach China satin trimmed with white lace and emerald green ribbons. Julia recognized the dress to be one her Aunt Rachel had given her before her departure, a castoff but lovely. Drawing it on, she found its square neckline fell a trifle low, though not objectionably so.

Julia tugged up the bodice, refusing to be detained one second longer than required. Once cinched, hooked, and buttoned, Julia whisked from the room, putting distance between herself and the tower as rapidly as possible.

Dinner proved a wearisome affair, the conversation revolving about the day's near-tragic hunt, the details recounted ad nauseam. Lord Eaton's gaze strayed periodically to Julia's décolletage as did those of several other gentlemen including Mr. Dilcox, who had skillfully maneuvered himself into the seat beside her. With the men's added height, Julia realized too late, they could glimpse a tantalizing hint of cleavage.

A pox on you, Aunt Rachel, Julia fumed silently as the servants cleared away the soiled plates, replacing them with small crystal bowls.

“I mean, do these Scots eat nothing besides oats?” Lady Henrietta Downs complained several seats away, drawing Julia's attention back to the conversation which had blessedly taken a new turn. “Cook has served little else since our arrival — for breakfast, lunch, tea, *or* dinner.”

Lord Eaton turned to the butler, who stood beside him, holding a silver bowl. “Lady Henrietta is quite right, Angus. Cook even sent us into the field with cold bars of porridge in our pockets instead of sandwiches.”

“Most traditional, m'lord.”

“And what of dinner just now? Oats in the soup, the stuffing, the pud, even the fish was coated with oats.”

“A tasty way it is to prepare fresh fish, m' lord.”

“Hmm, yes. What is that you have in the bowl there?” Everyone's eyes turned to the silver bowl and its fluffy contents.

“Cranachan, m' lord, a traditional sweet.”

“And what, precisely, is *cranachan*?”

“A delightful creation — lightly whipped cream served with raspberries.”

Lord Eaton frowned. “What are those flecks in the cream?”

“Toasted oats, of course, m'lord.”

A moan echoed around the table.

Later, retiring to the salon, the guests broke into small groups, some playing at whist and varied parlor games, most sinking into overstuffed chairs and sofas simply to continue their dinner discourse or read.

Julia saw that Lord Eaton continued to be surrounded with constant attentions. She could not possibly speak to him of her room openly. Making matters worse, Lilith perched on the arm of his chair and Aunt Sybil stood behind, both with the vigilant looks of watchdogs.

Julia fidgeted with her ring. Somehow, she must make arrangements for another room. And there were still questions she would have answered. She scanned the salon for Mr. McNab and spied him delivering the last of the drinks from his tray and heading toward the door. Julia quickened across the room, catching him just outside, in the hall.

“Mr. McNab, I would speak with you. I must know your objections to my staying in the tower room. What is wrong with it?”

“Wrong, miss?” His brows rumped. “There is nothing wrong with the room. 'Tis simply my employer's — Lord Muir's — practice not to billet guests in the tower, that and no more.”

“Yet, the room is kept in readiness, the linens fresh and the furniture dusted. Betty told me as much.” The Scotsman only shrugged. “Why then did Lord Eaton ignore his uncle's desires and place me there after all?”

The Scotsman shifted his weight, avoiding her gaze. “It would be indelicate of me to point out the obvious, miss.”

Oh, but the man was annoying. “And just what is the 'obvious,' Mr. McNab?”

“Why the proximity of m'lord's room in the adjoining corridor, of course.” He tucked his tray under his arm and set off down the hallway.

Shock rooted her in place. Several minutes passed before she collected herself enough to return to the salon. She leveled a murderous gaze at their insufferable host, who sprawled in a deep cushioned chair, his leg outstretched on an ottoman, surrounded by half the females in the room.

One thing was clear to her. Aunt Sybil may well have contrived to situate her in a room far distant from the others, but certainly not near at hand to Lord Eaton's. Julia also now understood the disapproving looks of Mrs. McGinty and Mr. McNab.

Julia moved woodenly toward the fireplace. She must speak with the butler yet again. In her surprise, she had forgotten to request new lodgings.

“You are still so pale, dear Julia.” Lady Charles clucked her tongue, coming to stand beside her. “I fear your humors have yet to revive. Here, a sherry is what you need. That and the warmth of the fire.”

Julia settled into a comfortable chair and sipped the drink as she waited for Mr. McNab to reappear. Several others joined her, including an attentive Mr. Dilcox. She listened to the surrounding conversation, her gaze wandering from time to time to where Emmaline stood surrounded by admirers.

An inordinate fatigue overtook her. She laid it to the toddy and sherry and her long wanderings out-of-doors in the sharp Highland air. Yet, this lethargy seemed disturbingly familiar . . . a bone-deep tiredness that had dogged her since morning . . . when she first awoke . . . and again, when she found herself on the lawn . . . outside the keep . . .

Her thoughts trailed off into sweet oblivion.

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Julia came hazily aware of someone lifting her. She caught a whiff of men's cologne and thought of Sir Robert. Nice man. Emmaline seemed to think so, she thought fuzzily. Julia drifted off again, then felt the softness of a mattress beneath her and Betty's voice as she helped her from her clothes. Through the groggy mist of fatigue and drink she felt the silky fabric of her nightgown whisper over her skin, then the weight of sheets and covers piled atop her. She mumbled her thanks to Betty and asked her to find Emmaline to come share the room.

“Whatever you say, miss.” Betty's footsteps faded across the floor.

Julia burrowed into the downy bed, confident Betty understood her, despite a few slurred words.

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Julia floated on a thin layer of sleep, dreaming of the poetic little cottage gardens of Hampshire. She admired one in particular abounding with hollyhocks, Sweet Williams, and mignonette hemming the cottage door.

The air stirred and she lifted her face to the sun, anticipating a light breeze to feather her cheek. Instead, the atmosphere grew heavy as iron, weighting her down and choking off her breath.

Panicked, Julia fought her way to consciousness. Hauling open her lids, she lay gulping the air. Awareness unfolded through her in increments as she focused on the shadowy canopy overhead. She lay abed in the tower chamber once more.

Julia groaned and turned her head to glance at the hearth. A lively fire crackled in its confines, bathing the room in shades of gold. She watched a moment, then dragged her gaze from the flames and settled it inadvertently on the bed hangings. Red.

Julia stiffened, her gaze skipping to the foot of bed. There in the shadows stood the elusive Scotsman, fully dressed, his eyes boring into her.

Julia squealed, her arms flailing gracelessly as she bolted upright and threw herself back against the headboard.

“W-who are you?” she gasped out, snatching for the coverlet and yanking it to her throat. “What are you doing in my bed chamber?”

A swift shadow of surprise swept across the man's features. “*Sassenach!*” The word escaped his lips, the sound deep and rich, mixed with incredulity and disapproval. He stepped from the end of the bed and rounded the side, his movements smooth, purposeful, dangerous.

“‘Tis my bed ye are warmin', lass, and I didna invite ye there. I know no' wha' mischief ye are about, or who sent ye. But I dinna take kindly t' trickery.”

Rae Mackinnon gazed down on the girl, wholly mystified. How did a *sassenach* come to be in his bed? Or in his castle for that matter? Was this someone's sorry idea of a jest, knowing of his long imprisonment in London's Tower?

Yet something set ill here. Three times now, the golden-haired lass had appeared, seemingly out of nowhere. And what of her clothes? — odd to be sure, especially the figure-hugging gown she had worn this afternoon, flaunting her bewitching curves. It surprised him that his men did not line up to win her favors or do worse.

Yet therein lay another puzzle. 'Twas perturbing enough the girl had vanished before his eyes, but 'twould seem he was the only one in the hall to have seen her. *Dhia*, there was much to explain here.

“I repeat. Who are ye, lass? Who sent ye?”

“I — I am Julia Hargrove,” Julia stammered beneath the Scotsman's penetrating stare. “I am a guest of . . . of the Laird of Dunraven Castle.”

Let him challenge that, she thought, her confidence returning. She might be Lord Eaton's guest, but she was indirectly Lord Muir's as well.

The Scotsman leaned forward, bracing his arms on either side of Julia and trapping her against the headboard. “Tell me how tha' can be, lass, when *I* am Laird o' Dunraven and hae ne'er set eyes on ye afore?”

Julia's eyes widened. “*You are* Lord Muir? But, I understood you to be aged — seventy years or more.”

“I know no' this `Lord Muir' and as ye can see I am far from aged — nine-and-twenty years tae be exact. Now explain yersel'. D'ye think tae plant yersel' in my bed and seduce me tae some end?”

“*Seduce?*” Julia's voice vaulted several notches higher. Her temper flamed at such gall, overriding her shock. “That is outrageous!”

The Scotsman's lips pulled into a hard smile. “And yet here ye be, waitin' in yer finery.” He ripped the covers from her fingers, exposing her nightgown and her bare legs where the fabric bunched at her knees. “I am wonderin' why ye bother wi' it a'tall for 'tis plain ye wear no' a stitch beneath.” His gaze fell to where the soft roundness of her breasts rose and fell against the thin fabric of her gown.

Julia's mouth opened and closed several times before she could speak. “This, sir, is my nightgown. I was sleeping,” she grit out, yanking the covers from his hands to shield her breasts. She rose on her knees, her anger multiplying. “*I told* you. I am a guest here, in particular of Roger Dunnington, Lord Eaton, and, in turn, of his uncle, Lord Muir, the Twenty-seventh Laird of Dunraven Castle.”

The Scotsman's eyes narrowed dangerously. “The de'il ye are.”

“You call me a liar?”

“Aye, tha' I do. For how can ye be the guest o' the twenty-seventh laird when I myself am the *third*.”

“The third?”

“Aye, the third.”

“Laird? Of Dunraven Castle?”

“So I said. Are ye deaf or daff? I am Rae Mackinnon, Third Laird o' Dunraven Castle in the year o' Our Lord, fourteen hundred and thirty-seven.”

Julia's jaw dropped, her breath deserting her. She struggled to regain herself and snapped her mouth shut.

“You, sir, are the liar. Or a lunatic. What game do you play, stealing into my chamber in the midst of the night, compromising my reputation? Do you play me for a fool? Fourteen hundred and thirty-seven indeed,” she huffed. “The year is eighteen hundred and ninety-three!”

“Enough!” He grabbed her arms and pulled her against his chest. “Who are ye, *sassenach*? Who d’ye serve and for wha’ gain? Did the English send ye? Or another clan, holdin’ hands across the border, or mayhap here at home wi’ those who would control the king?”

“King? What are you talking about? Victoria is Queen.”

The Scotsman scoffed outright. “James is but a bairn o’ six. He has no queen.”

“James?”

“Aye, James, Scotland’s wee king.”

Julia began to declare Scotland had no king of any size or age. But the look in the Scotsman’s eyes gave her pause, a look that told her he believed every word he spoke. She felt the heat drain from her face. What was happening here?

“Victoria is queen of the British Empire. She is seventy-four and a widow,” Julia voiced in a bare whisper. “Who . . . *what* are you?” she asked breathlessly, her gaze fixed on his seemingly solid features. “Are you a ghost?”

Irritation flickered in his eyes. “Flesh and bluid I am, lass, o’ tha’ ye can be sure. But mayhaps ’tis ye who is the *hant* for ye disappeared beneath my verra hands this day.”

He went rock still then pulled back from her, as though his last words struck some fresh thought deep in his heart. The Scotsman’s expression darkened, his eyes scouring her with such a black look, it set Julia’s heart to pounding.

“Mayhap ’tis no ghost ye are, but a witch,” he said with a growl, his blue eyes searing her. “A witch, bearin’ a witch’s mark!”

Lightning swift, he raked the bed covers from between them, then stripped Julia’s nightgown straight off, over her head in a single motion. Flinging her down on the mattress, he pinned her with his weight and began to examine her inch by naked inch, muttering he’d have his proof.

Julia’s sensibilities reeled under the Scotsman’s assault. She struggled against him, the prickly wool of his kilt sending up an instant rash wherever it grazed her bare skin. His strength held her fast though she squirmed and fought him as best she could. Fear stole her voice though she managed a strangled cry.

To Julia’s mortification, his hands moved over her, seemingly everywhere at once — skimming her breasts, stomach, thighs, and backside. He turned her this way and that, from front to back to front again. He even now inspected the soles of her feet and ankles for the cursed mark.

Julia started as his hands slipped upward over her calves and thighs, sending shivers of fire through her. But when one hand came to rest low on her abdomen, the fingers splaying, she began to thrash wildly, unsure of his intention.

Rae Mackinnon caught the girl’s wrists as she clouted his chest, entangling one hand in the chain about his neck. As he drew away her hand, the chain and its talisman followed, dragging from his shirt, snared by the lass’s ring.

Working quickly, he freed the two, lest the chain break and he lost the healing stone which protected against evil spirits and witches. He then pressed the golden lass back against the mattress, his stone dangling between them.

He studied her, uncertain what to believe as their gazes locked and held. The lass beneath his hands was as warm and real as any he’d ever known — certainly not a ghost and seemingly no witch either, for he found no condemning mark.

She still panted for breath from their exertions, glaring up at him with a mingling of anger and fear in her eyes. Her hair spilled over the pillows and about her in glorious disarray, gilded bright by the fire's light.

Och, but she was a beauty, Rae thought. Mayhap, she was an enchantress after all, holding him in thrall with her wide green eyes and temptress body. He knew not what wiles or power brought her to his bed, but for that trespass he'd require one kiss. One kiss in recompense, giving her reason to flee or to stay.

Julia saw the hungry look kindle the Scotsman's eyes. He gathered her to him, drawing her up in his arms till they both knelt in the middle of the mattress, pressed together. Before she could protest, his mouth crushed down on hers, a searing, possessive kiss.

His hand slid down her spine to the hollow of her back, then over her backside, kneading her flesh and holding her firmly against him. The wool of his plaid rasped her tender flesh, but through its folds she felt the startling proof of his desire.

Julia struggled to no avail as the Scotsman continued his aggression, parting her lips, and invading her mouth. She started as his tongue laid siege to hers, stroking, fencing, and ravishing till her blood surged beneath his seduction. Her voice abandoned her as did her strength, so undone was she by his possession.

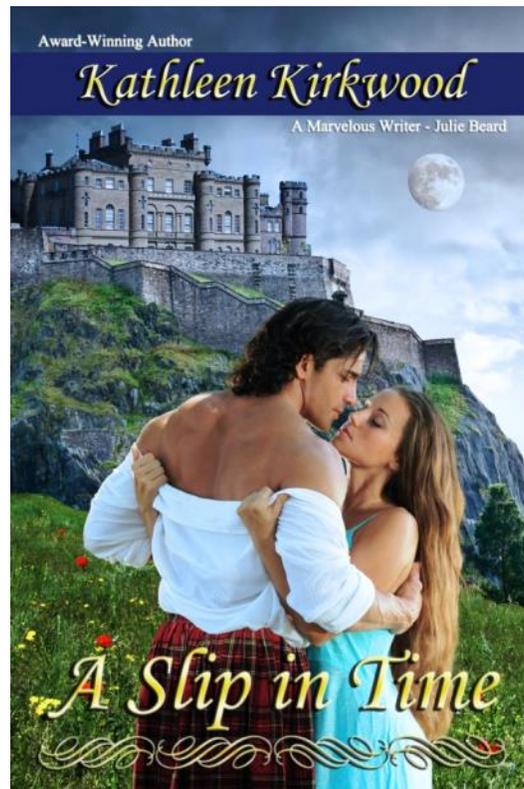
But as the heady kiss continued, the air turned heavy once more. Without warning, the Scotsman vanished from her arms, leaving her clutching thin air.

Julia tumbled back onto the pillows, panting for breath, while overhead the canopy and draperies dissolved from red into blue.

End of Sample

The Story Continues!

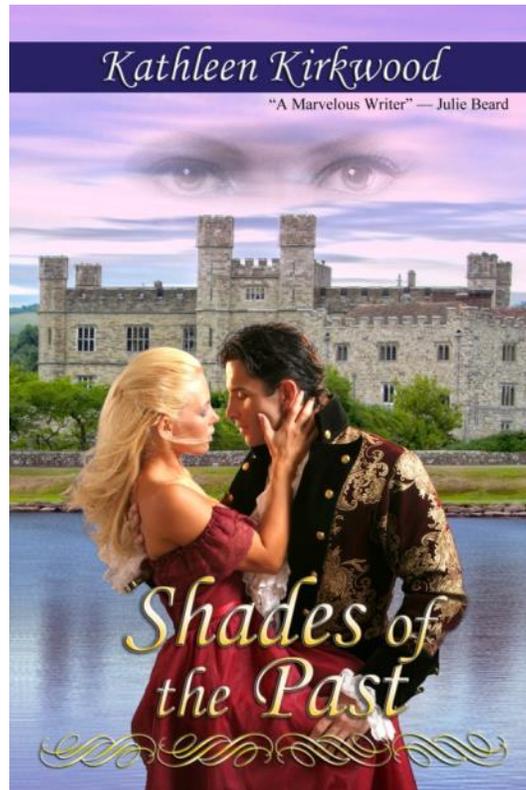
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A Slip In Time
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Shades of the Past

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Chapter 1

September 17, 1882

Royal Sherringham, ancient seat of the Viscounts Marrable
Herefordshire, England

Vanessa fought back a fresh rush of tears as she slipped the small, cloth-covered Bible into Lady Gwendolyn's still hands.

"Rest, dear friend. You are home at last at your beloved Sherringham."

Bending, Vanessa placed a kiss to her late employer's snowy head, then withdrew, lips trembling.

Lawrence Marrable, the younger of Lady Gwendolyn's twin nephews, stepped quickly forward. Steadying Vanessa by the arm, he drew her gently back into the small, black-clad circle of the Marrable family where they stood at the fore of Knights Chapel.

Vanessa's gaze lingered a moment longer on Lady Gwen's quiet form, lying pale in the open casket. But then her control slipped, and hot tears spilled over her cheeks and dampened the bodice of her dress.

"There now. Just a little longer," Lawrence heartened. "When all is done you can seek the privacy of your room and have it out." Producing a crisp handkerchief from his coat pocket, he offered it in place of her sodden one. "Poor Vanessa. How crushingly hard this must be for you. I dare say you were closer to Aunt Gwen than any of us these past few years."

Vanessa blotted her cheeks with the large square of monogrammed linen, ignoring his intimate use of her given name since he had been so good to her otherwise. Ignoring, too, his disregard for what she'd made clear earlier. She would depart Sherringham directly after the interment and funeral feast.

Majel, the elder of Lawrence's two younger sisters, turned from her husband's side, her gaze flicking to Vanessa then to her brother. "It's not as though Auntie couldn't return. Had she wanted to, that is." Her gaze cut to Vanessa once more.

Vanessa froze in place, stunned by the inference. Did Majel believe *she* had prevented Lady Gwendolyn's return to her childhood home these past two and a half years? Vanessa started to assure Majel it was her aunt's dearest wish to make the journey back to Sherringham, but it had always been Lady Gwen's decision to put off returning home in favor of some other unexplored locale.

Before Vanessa could voice her thoughts, Majel turned toward her husband, Lord Nigel Pendergast, at the same time looking once again to her brother and encompassing him with her hazel gaze.

"We've delayed long enough, Lawrence. Mourners from the village have been gathering all morning at the mausoleum, and the children and our guests are waiting in the carriages for the procession to commence. We simply must begin the services."

"Oh, no, but we can't!" Cissy, the youngest of the Marrable siblings protested, sweeping forward from her own husband's side. "Adrian has yet to arrive. We cannot conduct the service without him."

"And precisely how long do you suggest we wait?" Majel's nostrils flared delicately. "It's deplorable he's not seen fit to join us already."

"Why do you assume the fault is his?" Cissy's voice rose defensively.

“And why do you assume it is not?”

At that, the two sisters dissolved into a peppery discussion, with their brother and spouses attempting to inject their own opinions and a measure of calm rationale.

Vanessa stepped apart of the animated clan, rubbing the space between her brows. It was not the first time the high-spirited family had disagreed over some aspect of the funeral arrangements. Poor Mr. Marrable—or rather, “Lawrence,” as he insisted she call him. He'd overseen every detail, doing his utmost to ensure the very finest provisions be made for his aunt and that all proceeded smoothly.

As the voices continued to rumble in her ears, Vanessa drew a breath and sought to regain hold of her own emotions. For a moment, she allowed her gaze to wander over the chapel and its rich Gothic interior.

Knights Chapel was exquisite, centuries old but carefully maintained, filled with a profusion of oak and stained glass. A huge clerestory window rose behind the altar while other, narrower ones, filled with bearded saints, lined the side walls. Before the railing of the sanctuary, bronze candelabras flanked Lady Gwendolyn's casket, while flowers overflowed the steps and stands, their heavy floral scent underlined by a slight mustiness of ancient wood and stone.

Sherringham, Vanessa had discovered, held many treasures such as Knights Chapel. In truth, she'd seen only a small portion of the entire complex, but she could easily understand Lady Gwendolyn's longing to return.

And yet she hadn't.

Vanessa shifted her stance along with her thoughts as she walked toward a row of splendidly canopied stalls, intricately carved, the seats lined with cushions of crimson velvet.

Lady Gwen *had* intended to return, one day. Certainly, there had been opportunity. And yet, from the moment Vanessa first entered Lady Gwendolyn's employ as her companion, the two of them were ever bolting off in diverse directions throughout the Isles and the Continent.

These past years had been grand, exciting, breathless. But the choices of their destinations had all been Lady Gwen's. She'd meant to visit Sherringham, truly. But time suddenly ran dry. Lady Gwen died this week past of a massive apoplectic attack in their Paris apartments.

Vanessa glanced to where Lawrence stood with his sisters and brothers-in-law, the top of his bright head visible above theirs. She didn't know what she would have done without him. She'd known nowhere else to wire the sorrowful news but Sherringham, or rather “Royal” Sherringham, as it was properly called. Fortunately, Lawrence was in residence when her telegram arrived. He came at once to Paris and took charge of preparations to see herself and his late aunt home to England.

Vanessa's gaze drifted to the row of banners overhanging the family stalls and fastened on one in particular. It carried the distinctive coat-of-arms of the Marrables—a black panther with gold spots, rising from an equally black helm, surmounted by a viscount's coronet. The beast reared up in fight, its claws extended and painted blood red.

“No, no! We *cannot* begin without him,” Cissy's cry snapped Vanessa's attention back to the group. “Adrian is Viscount after all, the family patriarch. Oh, Henry, convince them,” she pleaded with her husband, Lord Norland. “It would be unseemly to bury Aunt Gwendolyn without him present. She was like a second mother to us all.”

The remark elicited a sharp retort from Majel which, in turn, brought further debate over the “inexcusably absent” viscount.

Vanessa tried to envision an identical copy of Lawrence—hair full of sunshine, sky-blue eyes, a pronounced dimple in one cheek which gave him a boyish look. Patriarchs should be

grayed or balding, she mused. But Adrian Marrable, like his twin brother, was but one and thirty years.

“My dear Cissy, we might delay a very long time indeed and never see poor Auntie laid to rest if we wait on our brother,” Lawrence reasoned, as though he were solacing an hysterical child. “You know he hasn’t returned since . . . well, since the accident.”

Silence descended abruptly over the group like a pall. It was as though Lawrence had just uttered the unspeakable, something forbidden, taboo. As the foursome stood momentarily mute, Vanessa’s mind scrambled for what little she knew of Lady Gwen’s eldest nephew, the viscount.

“Notable but ill-fated,” she’d once called him. Despite his age—midway through his twenty-eighth year when Vanessa first met Lady Gwendolyn—he had already been twice wed, and twice widowed, with each of his wives having died after brief marriages and each quite tragically. Lady Gwen shared nothing of the specific circumstances surrounding the women’s untimely deaths. Still, it was evident she ached for her nephew and for his great misfortune.

Instinctively, Vanessa felt her gaze drawn once more to the banner where the fierce panther of the Viscounts Marrable seemed to rage against life itself.

“Then, it’s settled,” Lawrence declared. “For whatever reason Adrian has chosen not to appear, or to communicate his wishes or regrets with us at this sad time, it is our duty to continue in his stead.”

Consulting his watch, he signaled to Mr. Brown, the undertaker, and his assistants to attend to the casket.

“The mourners have now waited an additional quarter-hour thanks to our indecisiveness. We shan’t leave them a moment longer.” Returning his timepiece to his pocket, he turned and started toward Vanessa.

As Lawrence moved to her side, Vanessa stole a parting glance of the banners overhead.

“Are you ready?” He encircled her shoulders with his arm and gave her a gentle squeeze.

Vanessa stiffened, surprised by his familiarity. But before she could object and step from his embrace, the Marrable banner, with its angry panther, stirred to life. The folds rippled conspicuously, as if caught on a sharp and sudden breeze. Yet there was none. None that she could perceive.

“Is something the matter?”

Too late Vanessa realized she had released a soft but audible gasp. “There. Do you see that?” She gestured to the fabric still swaying above them as it settled back into its original position.

“A draft, no doubt.” Lawrence shrugged, releasing her shoulder. “Bound to have a good many of them in a place like Knights Chapel.”

“But the other banners were not affected,” she observed, drawing his attention to their dormant forms.

Again he shrugged. “Just an oddity. Sherringham has an abundance of those. Come along now. It is time.”

Drawing her gaze downward, Vanessa glanced toward the coffin, glimpsing Lady Gwen’s narrow hands and the volume they clasped as the lid closed over her.

Tears welled in her eyes once more. Death was not unfamiliar to her, but that did not take away the awful finality of each passing.

“May you rest ever in peace, dear lady,” Vanessa whispered softly. “You are home at last.”

Slipping her hand through Lawrence’s arm, she braced herself for the coming hour and allowed him to lead her out.

Despite the chill that clung to the morning air, the sun shone strong enough to warm Vanessa's cheeks as she stepped into its brilliant light.

A long row of carriages lined the drive, at their lead the windowless hearse, adorned with black ostrich feathers. Its four midnight horses bore the same inky plumes upon their heads, plus black leather trappings studded with silver and black velvet coverings on their backs.

Behind the hearse, in place of honor, stood the Marrable carriage which Majel and Cissy now mounted. They were assisted by two official "mutes," the undertaker's solemn-faced staff, cloaked and sashed in lusterless black, with long crape weepers flowing from their tall hats.

Next came the Pendergast and Norland carriages containing the children—girls all—who sat straight and silent, awaiting their lordly fathers to join them. A fourth conveyance held two more of the Norland children, Beatrice, the youngest, and Geoffrey, the eldest and the only boy between both broods. Accompanying them were Nurse Ridgely who attended Baby Bea, and Nanny Pringle who, as Vanessa understood it, had raised all four of the Marrable siblings and now lived in permanent retirement at Sherringham.

An assortment of family friends and acquaintances filled the remaining carriages, though positioned at the very rear were a number of empty equipages, sent by those unable to be in attendance.

Vanessa started to withdraw her hand from the crook of Lawrence's arm, thinking to seek a place in the latter vehicles. At the same moment, he paused before the fourth carriage and turned to assist her up.

Young Geoffrey, Cissy's eleven-year old son, smiled broadly and scooted close to Nanny, freeing a place beside him on the cushioned seat. Realizing Lawrence's intent and Master Geoffrey's expectations, Vanessa took a polite step back.

"Thank you, you are most kind. But my place is properly in the back carriages."

"We won't hear of it, will we, Geoffrey?" Lawrence shared a conspiratorial glance with his nephew who promptly shook his head. "Aunt Gwendolyn certainly would wish it. From her letters, we—that is, the family—know you brought her immeasurable happiness."

A deep-felt pleasure stole through Vanessa at his words. "I do hope that's true, still it would be inappropriate for me to—"

"As a personal favor then," Lawrence interrupted, leaning close for her alone to hear. "The lad could use a bit of help with Nanny despite what my sister thinks."

Vanessa glanced past his shoulder to where Nanny sat beside Geoffrey, fumbling with the ribbons that dangled from her bonnet. Suddenly the boy's presence in the carriage became clear. Nanny tended to be a "bit fuddled" these days, according to Cissy. Lawrence, she knew, deemed Nanny's condition more serious, her lapses in memory progressively worsening, though she could recall the past with astonishing clarity.

From what Vanessa had observed during her brief stay at Sherringham, she tended to agree with Lawrence. Still, it was both thoughtful and perceptive of Cissy to arrange a companion for Nanny, even one so young as Geoffrey.

Vanessa looked to the boy and smiled. "I would be honored to ride with you," she agreed, though in truth she felt completely out of place to be included within the family circle.

At that, Lawrence handed her up, then touching the brim of his hat, withdrew to join his brothers-in-law. The three waited respectfully for the coffin to be borne to the hearse before climbing into their own respective carriages. Moments later the somber procession pulled away from the portals of Sherringham.

Geoffrey continued to smile at Vanessa. He was a bright, cheerful lad who'd been her second shadow since her arrival. Just now, he looked as though he wished to make conversation but hadn't a hint of what to say.

With a jolt and a sway, the carriage left the main road, entering a narrow track that stretched across luxuriant open fields. Nanny's hands quieted, and she gazed out over the expanse to lofty but distant trees. Meanwhile, Baby Bea nestled in her nurse's plump arms, and despite the jolting, fell asleep.

"Is this the customary way to the mausoleum?" Vanessa pulled her gaze from the scene and turned to Geoffrey.

He nodded, still smiling. "It lies past the follies. Well, two of them anyway—the Abbey Ruin and the Orangery."

"Ah, follies, how delightful." It did not surprise her that Sherringham possessed those picturesque and oftentimes fanciful edifices aristocrats were so fond of raising in their landscape gardens.

"Do you like them? Some of Sherringham's are quite old," Geoffrey continued, enthused by her interest. "Others are only made to look that way. Uncle calls those 'sham ruins.' They are scattered all over the estate. Uncle says the idea is for each folly to be hidden from sight of the others so when one happens upon them it seems as if they've stepped back into another time."

"What a lovely thought," Vanessa commented, thinking it supremely romantic. "And what else does he say?"

Geoffrey straightened. "That it is the duty of each of the Marrable men who inherit the estate to improve it in some way so that future Marrables might enjoy Royal Sherringham for generations to come."

"How very noble." Vanessa felt a warm glow in her heart for this man and his high ideals. "I think your Uncle Lawrence is quite right."

"Oh, not Uncle Lawrence. Uncle Adrian."

Vanessa's heart dropped out of place. She wished to snatch back her bit of flattery. Though she'd kept her sentiments concealed, it rankled sorely that Viscount Marrable had not the civility to appear for his aunt's funeral, a woman who, if Cissy had the right of it, had been "as a mother" to him.

Geoffrey's eyes suddenly brightened. "Oh, look, there is my favorite folly now."

As they passed a wooded copse of towering oaks, the skeletal remains of an ancient abbey came into view. Its haunting silhouette leaned against the sky, conjuring ages past.

"The south side is real, part of a thirteenth-century cloister that was moved stone-by-stone from Wales after King Henry destroyed it," Geoffrey explained. "The rest is a sham. Mama used to let us play there but Uncle won't allow it anymore."

Nanny, who had been listening intently, suddenly leaned forward and pinned Vanessa with her small round eyes.

"I told the boys not to dally there. Portions of the ruins are crumbling, you know. The viscount was very angry when they disobeyed me."

Vanessa leveled Geoffrey a surprised look. "You and your companions directly disobeyed Nanny?"

Geoffrey's brows shot upward. "I? Er, no . . ."

Nanny studied the boy, confusion clouding her eyes, then the look cleared.

"Not Master Geoffrey. Dear, no. He's a good boy. Always listens. I was speaking of Masters Adrian and Lawrence. Now, they are a handful, I can tell you."

She stopped again, her brows knitting.

"I mean, they *were*. Indeed yes, they were." She patted Geoffrey on the hand. "Your Uncle Lawrence is right. The ruins are dangerous. You must stay away from them, child."

Vanessa tilted her head. Surely, Nanny confused Lawrence's name with Adrian's, the viscount. Not that it mattered which brother forbade the children to play here, as long as one did.

The procession trundled on, the ruins disappearing from view. In short order, they came upon a second building, this one so exquisite it stole her breath. The creamy, fairy-tale confection sat amid a glade at the end of a long reflection pool. The shape, she could scarcely define. Two octagonals joined by a narrow central hall, she would say. The whole of it rose two stories high while a smaller, central tower crowned this, adding a third story.

Despite the plentiful use of Gothic embellishments, the pavilion was an airy, lyrical creation, its surface seemingly faceted and its large, gracefully arched windows filled with dozens of smaller hexagonal panes. Vanessa realized, of a sudden, that the windows on ground level were not glazed at all but completely open, the stonework partitions empty of glass.

"That is the Orangery." Geoffrey pointed to the wondrous construction. "It was to be Uncle Adrian's addition to Sherringham. He began it for his last wife, Mama says. But he stopped work on it after she died."

"How sad. It's far too beautiful to leave abandoned."

"Oh, don't worry. Uncle Lawrence convinced Uncle Adrian to allow him to finish it. When it's complete, Uncle Lawrence promises it will house all kinds of exotic trees and plants. Maybe even some tropical birds. He calls it Sherringham's most special treasure box."

"If it is unfinished, as you suggest, might I assume your uncle doesn't permit you to play here either?"

"No, but there are other follies where we might play—if we have adults with us, that is." His smile widened.

Vanessa returned the smile, suddenly wishing she had more time to linger at Sherringham and seek out its many fascinating and varied secrets.

"Geoffrey, you said the mausoleum lies past the second folly. Are we near to it then?"

"It's just over the rise. Uncle considers it one of Sherringham's finest works of architecture."

"Truly now?" She eased back in her seat, not asking to which uncle he referred or what could be so enamoring about a house of the dead.

Minutes later the path dipped downward, and the funeral cortege entered a small forested dell. At the heart of the hollow dwelled a circular temple of classical design, elevated on a high podium and colonnaded all around. A large dome dominated the structure, floating above a band of windows. Vanessa deemed the edifice neither Greek nor Roman, precisely, but certainly evocative of those ancient times. Truly, as Geoffrey said, it seemed they had just passed into yet another world.

Single file, the carriages progressed around the mausoleum to the far side. There, wide marble steps marked it as the building's front and ascended to massive bronze doors adorned with black wreaths. Before the building, the open green stretched several hundred yards then abruptly dropped away, exposing a view of the River Wye rushing at a far distance below.

Here, too, before the steps, gathered a substantial crowd, waiting to pay their last respects to a grand lady and lay her to rest.

Vanessa helped Geoffrey aid Nanny Pringle and Mrs. Ridgely from the carriage, then accompanied them to join the family and Canon Greene. As they came to stand with the other

children behind Lawrence and their parents, Majel turned and swept a cool look over Vanessa, arching a brow at her presence.

Seeing this, Cissy instantly reached back and gave a squeeze to Vanessa's hand. "We are all so glad you are here," she heartened, then darted a reproving look at her sister.

As the pallbearers bore the coffin from the hearse to the funeral bier, erected before the steps, the women faced forward again and looked on with silent respect.

Periodically, Cissy glanced over her shoulder as if in search of someone. No doubt she sought her brother, the viscount, Vanessa reasoned, for despite his failings this day, his sister remained steadfast in her faith of him. Oddly, in that moment, Vanessa saw herself reflected in Cissy, reminding her of her own unswayable faith in a man, a man once pledged and joined to her, but perpetually absent from her life.

As the canon intoned the Prayers of the Dead, Cissy relinquished her vigil, as did Vanessa her thoughts of the man she had buried three years past.

The clergyman continued his recitation, his melodious voice soon fading to a singsong chant in her ears. Vanessa fought her wandering mind but with no great success. Death had altered the course of her life once more. Still, she would not soon forget this exceptional time in her life.

Vanessa glanced over the crowd, again struck by the number in attendance and by their genuine outpouring of love. Lady Gwen had touched so many lives. How her family and friends must have missed her these last years. But of course, the loss was hers as well.

Majel's words came needling back to prick at Vanessa's thoughts. Why *hadn't* Lady Gwen returned when, seemingly, she had every reason to do so?

Vanessa's eyes shifted to the polished, elm coffin with its spray of white lilies. Only Lady Gwen held that answer, and she took it now with her to the tomb.

The canon closed his prayer book. Lowering it before him, he folded his hands over the volume and addressed the gathering. Nanny sniffled into her black-edged hanky as he began to share his own recollections of the ever vibrant and generous Lady Gwendolyn Marrable.

Vanessa found herself fighting back fresh tears but fortified herself, hoping the services were near to completion.

Officially, the funeral observances began two days earlier when Sherringham opened its doors for the customary public viewing. Last night, Lady Gwen was moved to Knights Chapel for a formal and extended prayer service, at which time Lawrence delivered the eulogy in his brother's stead. This morning the coffin was opened for a final viewing for the immediate family, preceded only by a brief photographic session in order to catch the morning light.

For Vanessa, the custom of photographing the deceased seemed a rather morbid practice, but wishing to please the family, she did as they asked. Lady Gwen, an expert and accomplished photographer in her own right, had personally tutored Vanessa in the art. Apparently, Lady Gwen had written the family glowing reports of her progress. Thus, confident of Vanessa's abilities, they made their request.

Cissy especially asked that Vanessa assemble a "mourning album" in her aunt's memory and include individual portraits of the family. After all, she pointed out, Aunt Gwendolyn's death had been the catalyst for drawing the family back together at Sherringham. They had not been so for a very long time. Not since the last funeral, that of the most recent Viscountess Marrable.

Vanessa held the sittings yesterday afternoon. The viscount's portrait, naturally, was not among those taken. Nor did she intend to substitute another in the album. Let the volume speak for itself, honestly reflecting this occasion.

She felt her ire rising once more. One should not judge another, still she found the viscount's absence indefensible. Oh, had she but two solid minutes with the man, face-to-face, wouldn't she furnish him with a few sharp opinions of her own on the matter of such negligence?

Before she could draw a breath, the thud of hooves and heavy rumble of wheels reverberated in her ears. Turning, Vanessa spied a shiny black coach rounding the drive. As it rolled to a halt before the mausoleum, she saw it bore a distinctive coat-of-arms on its door—that of a fierce, growling panther, its claws spread and ready for battle.

Vanessa took a deep swallow, not needing to ask who rode inside. Dear Lord, had she conjured the man by mere thought?

Murmurs rippled through the crowd and she heard the viscount's name gasped from many a pair of lips. In front of her, several paces away, Lawrence stilled, his features turning to granite.

“Well, well, if it isn't Viscount Marrable,” he uttered as if to himself. “So Adrian's made the funeral after all.”

The coldness of his tone startled Vanessa. It was not at all sympathetic as earlier in the chapel when he defended his brother's absence. To the contrary, his voice now held a purely derisive note.

Vanessa returned her gaze to the coach where the footman hastened to open the door. Her pulses quickened. What had Lawrence said? His brother hadn't returned since the “accident”? Presumably, he referred to the death of the last viscountess.

Her thoughts deserted her as the door opened and a man began to emerge. She waited, breath pent, anticipating the familiar golden features that would perfectly duplicate Lawrence's own.

Instead, a dark and powerful figure appeared, his broad shoulders momentarily filling the carriage door as he stepped out and descended. He wore a long, black frock coat and a mourning band on his arm. His tall silk hat shadowed his face, yet his eyes burned beneath its brim, their color as dark as his sable hair.

Vanessa fought to keep her chin from dropping to her chest. Why had she presumed the brothers to be identical? No one actually ever suggested as much, not even Lady Gwen. Obviously, Adrian and Lawrence Marrable were fraternal twins. In looks at least, the two were as different as night from day.

As the viscount started forward, the crowd parted, opening a wide path before him. Looking neither right nor left, he proceeded toward the mausoleum, his lips a tight, unsmiling line set above a hard, square-cut jaw. As he neared the place where the Marrable family stood, his eyes sheered to Lawrence, scalding him with his look.

A shiver skimmed along Vanessa's spine. She could not fathom the man's behavior. Was it so abhorrent to him to return to Sherringham?

Severing his gaze from his brother's, the viscount continued on, advancing to where the coffin reposed upon the bier and the canon stood with prayer book in hand, his fingers trembling noticeably.

But the master of Sherringham ignored the cleric and afforded him not a second's glance. Reaching into his coat, he withdrew a single white rose and placed it atop his aunt's coffin. Then, sinking to one knee, he laid a gloved hand upon the elmwood and bowed his head. After a prolonged moment of silent meditation, he rose again to his feet, but not before he leaned toward the casket and pressed a light kiss to its side.

What criticisms Vanessa held of Adrian Marrable dissolved in her heart. Those around her appeared equally astounded as she.

Turning on his heel, the viscount headed toward the Marrable clan, swiftly closing the distance between them. Fire kindled in his eyes once more while tension spread along his jaw, sharpening its line.

As he came to stand before them, he swept his gaze over his brother, his sisters, and their husbands, then glanced past them to the children and Nanny Pringle. His dark eyes next fell upon Vanessa and he paused, his brows drawing together.

Heat flushed through her, straight from her scalp to her toes. He continued to study her, obviously having not the slightest notion as to her identity or why she, a stranger, stood among his relatives. Oh, why did she agree to Lawrence's request and allow herself to be included where she did not belong?

Something flickered in the depths of his eyes just then, but in the next instant, he broke away his gaze and directed it to Lawrence.

"We will speak later, brother." His fine rich voice carried back to Vanessa. "For now, I would know what arrangements remain concerning the interment."

The viscount's expression darkened as Lawrence apprised him of the final provisions for the burial rites.

"You mean to say, *all* the pallbearers are supplied by Mr. Brown's establishment? Is there not one relation or friend among them to see our aunt to her crypt?"

"Brother"—Lawrence's voice softened to a conciliating tone—"surely you realize, the closest of her acquaintances are older than she. I did arrange for a number of them to be honorary pallbearers, with Mr. Brown providing alternates to act in their place."

"And are *we* in our dotage?" the viscount challenged, bringing a look of surprise to Lawrence's face.

"It was unclear you would arrive in time, and more, the grieving family is not expected to—"

The viscount stepped toe-to-toe with his brother, standing a full six inches above him and glaring down hard at him.

"Some things should not be given over to others. And sometimes it's best to do the unexpected. Aunt Gwendolyn deserves our hearts *and* our hands this day. By God, she shall have mine."

At that, he motioned over the undertaker, and announced that he, himself, would replace one of the pallbearers.

"Adrian, you *cannot*." Majel bristled. "It is unbecoming your station. Think of propriety, brother."

At that he spun on her. "Propriety be damned! I shall have my will in this, with or without your approval, or anyone else's."

He tugged at his gloves, at the same time eyeing Lawrence and Lords Norland and Pendergast.

"Join me or not, as you will, but my mind is firm. I shall carry Aunt Gwendolyn in death, as she carried me in life, when I could not bear myself."

With that he stalked toward the coffin and Canon Greene who stood gaping, his mouth dropped wide.

"I will help you, Uncle!" Geoffrey blurted, breaking from Vanessa's side and slipping between his mother and Uncle Lawrence. He rushed to join the viscount, crooking back his head to look up at him. "Please, Uncle, may I help?"

Vanessa watched amazed as the boy waited expectantly, displaying not a whit of fear of his lordly uncle. Others, much older, positively quaked before the man, she noted, their perceptions

obviously far different. Still, as she watched Adrian Marrable give an approving pat to Geoffrey's shoulder, she could only wonder if the boy's perceptions might be the more trustworthy.

A step away, Cissy smiled proudly at her son, tears rimming her eyes. She turned her watery gaze to her husband who appeared equally moved.

"I shall lend my strength as well," Lord Norland volunteered, stepping forward.

Lawrence remained stock-still, coloring to a deep, ruddy red. A hard, bright anger flashed in his eyes.

If the brothers shared any similarities, perhaps it was a choleric temperament, Vanessa thought fleetingly. Yet Lawrence's aspect transfixed her, jarring her back to an incident in Paris, shortly after he arrived.

It had been a trivial matter over a bit of spilled wine. In truth, Lawrence was the one who caused the mishap. To her mortification, he exploded in a fit of rage, berating the waiter and making a rude scene in the hotel dining room to the embarrassment of all. Now as she looked on his mien, so like that night, she wondered that she'd forgotten it.

Lord Pendergast's voice drew Vanessa's attention as he argued a point with his wife. He then spoke briefly with Lawrence. Though a muscle continued to twitch in his jaw, Lawrence acquiesced and, together, they strode toward the others and relieved two more of the pallbearers. Majel watched, fury in her face.

Reopening his prayer book, Canon Greene began reading the Twenty-third Psalm as he led the small procession up the mausoleum steps. Cissy and Majel now also followed, leaving the children to their nurses' care. Accompanied by Mr. Brown, they trailed at a respectful distance behind the coffin and its bearers.

"We must wait now," Nanny informed Vanessa, nodding as the others disappeared inside the mausoleum. "It is Marrable custom for only the family and necessary attendants to enter the crypt during interments. It is a most private time, of course."

"Of course," Vanessa echoed, noting the mourners remained essentially where they stood, breaking into clusters and murmuring quietly among themselves.

Nanny, meanwhile, moved off to gather the wildflowers sprinkled over the lawn, white corn-daisies and purple heartsease. Vanessa strolled close behind, lest Nanny wander too near the promontory's edge.

Twenty minutes elapsed before anyone issued from the mausoleum. The Pendergasts first appeared, followed by the Norlands with young Geoffrey at his mother's side.

Descending to the bottom steps, Majel, who had presided as Sherringham's official hostess these past days, addressed the crowd, extending her gratitude for their presence. With that she instructed the servants to distribute the family's gifts of mourning gloves and scarves to those who had come up from the village and not yet received them.

Ensconced in their carriage once more, the Pendergasts led the entourage back to the mansion while the villagers disbursed across the green and down the road.

Happily, Geoffrey quickly rejoined Vanessa for it took considerable effort to persuade Nanny to abandon the unpicked flowers and return to their carriage. At last, bouquet in hand, Nanny climbed heavily into her seat, situating herself across from Nurse Ridgely and Baby Bea. Without pause, Geoffrey and Vanessa followed.

As the driver snapped the reins and the horses pulled away, Adrian and Lawrence Marrable emerged from the mausoleum's great bronze doors. Lawrence stilled his step and looked straight

toward her, but in so doing, drew his brother's gaze. The viscount followed Lawrence's line of sight, finding Vanessa at its end.

In the crisp autumn air, she went inexplicably warm as Adrian Marrable's dark eyes fastened on hers. Instincts deep within knelled their cautioning bells. But of what they warned remained unclear.

Vanessa shook away her sudden unease. There was nothing of which to be concerned, she chided herself, aware of her racing heart. In roughly four hours' time, she would board her train and depart Sherringham and this man forever.

Chapter 2

Vanessa revisited her bedroom long enough to remove her cloak and bonnet, secure her trunks, and refresh herself.

She splashed her face with cool water, smoothed her hair into place, and made a quick assessment of her appearance in the full-length mirror.

She grimaced at the pallid-looking creature staring back at her. Lord, it was a wonder someone hadn't attempted to carry her off to the crypt this day, mistaking her for one of the departed.

The dull black bombazine of her mourning dress siphoned all color from her face, while her hair improved matters little, its mass swept back into a chignon at the nape of her neck. Only the fringe of honeyed curls framing her face added any color.

Very little color, Vanessa decided, pinching her cheeks and biting her lips to bring out a blush.

As she adjusted her skirts and the soft bustle gathered at the back, a knock sounded at the door. The maid, Mary Ethel, entered in the next breath, her hands clasped before her.

"You wished to see me, madam?"

"Yes, Mary Ethel." Vanessa smiled, pleased the girl had come so promptly. "I must leave for Hereford Station no later than three o'clock. Mr. Marrable has arranged for a carriage, but my trunks will need to be carried down and loaded before then."

Vanessa crossed the room to where her luggage stood to the left of the door. "As you see, there are three pieces. The men will need to take particular care with the two marked Breakables. Those contain my photographic equipment and chemicals."

Mary Ethel nodded attentively. "And what of the box, there by the bed? Should the men take that as well?"

Vanessa looked to the sizable square box sitting on the floor, V. G. WYNTERS stenciled on the sides.

"No. It holds my undeveloped plates. I'll return later to carry it down personally." She smiled. "That way, should anything break, I can only blame myself."

Mary Ethel again nodded her understanding and turned to leave. With a start, Vanessa remembered Lawrence's handkerchief and called to the maid. Producing the linen from a hidden pocket in her skirt, she gave it over.

"Please see this is laundered and returned to Mr. Marrable."

"Yes, madam." Mary Ethel eyed the embroidered initials adorning the handkerchief then, with a courteous bob of her head, withdrew.

Vanessa skimmed a glance over the room, wishing she could have visited under happier circumstances. The guest bedchamber, like so much at Sherringham, was a gem. Aside from centuries-old furnishings, it possessed the most charming of windows—a six-lobed rosette, filled with mullioned glass and bearing a heraldic device.

If only there had been the opportunity to photograph it, and so much more at Royal Sherringham. The preparations surrounding the funeral had left little time. Then, too, there were the arrangements she'd had to make pertaining to her own immediate future.

Her future. *What lay there?* she wondered, then put the thought aside. For now, she must attend to the present and see through the funeral feast before taking her leave. The future would be upon her quickly enough, wherever it led.

Quitting the chamber, she made her way along the vaulted passageway of the Upper Cloisters. Its ribbed ceiling soared overhead while large Gothic windows arched along the right wall, overlooking an enclosed courtyard. Classical busts rested on pedestals between each window. Despite the mix of styles, the ecclesiastical tone prevailed. She'd not be surprised if a long-robed monk appeared any moment from an adjoining corridor.

Vanessa smiled at the thought as she came to a flight of stairs and turned onto them. They reminded her of turreted stairs of centuries past, the stone steps twining narrowly downward. Presumably, this section of the Sherringham owned a great age. How old, she could not guess, though Geoffrey claimed Sherringham had its beginnings as a border castle on the Welsh Marches. Before that, he divulged, wide-eyed, the place had been the site of ancient Druid worship and ritual.

That thought sent a decided chill sledding through her. Gratefully, she reached a landing just then. Passing through an arched portal, she entered a long, broad gallery.

Here the decor changed dramatically, dispatching all thoughts of monks, border lords, and Druid priests. Crimson-colored damask covered the walls, rising above milky-white paneling, trimmed with gold. Overhead, ornate plasterwork festooned the ceiling with gilded circles, trefoils, and medallions.

Midway down, the gallery opened onto one of Sherringham's two grand staircases leading to the ground level. Vanessa began her descent, pleasuring in the journey as ever she did. The elegant staircase turned back on itself several times, while tapestries and paintings graced the walls. A huge glass lantern hung suspended in the stairwell on a heavy bronzed chain, all of uncertain age and undoubtedly precious.

However far back Sherringham's history truly reached, Vanessa knew that, early in the last century, its owners had enthusiastically embraced the Gothic Revival movement. For more than a hundred and fifty years, the viscounts had restored, refurbished, transformed, and added to Sherringham with a zealous passion. She imagined it cost them a staggering fortune. Perhaps, several.

The stairs brought her to a large chamber at the front of the manor house, adjacent to the entrance hall. A second grand staircase flanked the opposite side, in a similar chamber. In truth, the rooms and doors along the front of the manse aligned in such a way as to provide an extended perspective in either direction.

Vanessa glanced into the entrance hall and observed the activity there where a number of the guests mingled and conversed. Recognizing none of them, she began to withdraw her gaze. Just then, the heavy front door opened wide and Adrian and Lawrence Marrable appeared.

Vanessa's limbs momentarily froze as they entered, and she found she could do no more than stare. The others stared too, pausing in their conversations. One-by-one, they offered reserved, though polite, acknowledgment of the viscount's presence.

He acknowledged them as well, with equal restraint, his bearing aristocratically remote, unapproachable. A near tangible tension crackled about him, and she thought of a panther caged.

Vanessa continued to watch, fascinated, as he removed his overcoat and hat and gave them over to the footman. She saw now that Adrian Marrable possessed a wondrously thick mane of hair. Saw, too, how his profile was perfectly straight and his eyes deep-set, bordered with long black lashes.

She transferred her gaze to Lawrence as he, too, divested himself of his outer garments. Curiously, he neither looked nor spoke to his lordly brother, nor anyone else in the hall. Instead, he strode unsmiling from view.

Before Vanessa could dwell on it further, a movement caught her eye. A stout man with balding pate left his place by the portal and approached the viscount, causing him to turn in her direction.

Recovering herself, Vanessa quickly moved off before he could catch sight of her or entrap her once more with his dark, possessive gaze.

She headed toward the Grand Saloon, expecting the preponderance of the funeral guests to be gathered there. Entering, she found herself more than correct. A crush of people filled the room, overflowing the furniture and standing about in small clutches.

She searched for a familiar face, realizing it likely to be a futile gesture. She knew scarcely a soul. Most of the guests had arrived only yesterday and were primarily distant relatives and acquaintances of Lady Gwendolyn from years past. Most of her more recent friends, those whom they'd visited during their extensive travels, were wide flung and naturally unable to attend.

Vanessa glimpsed Cissy and Majel moving through the room, speaking individually with the guests and receiving their condolences. Recognizing no one else, Vanessa threaded her way slowly through the body of people, making her way toward the immense bay window on the opposite side.

Of all the rooms she'd been privileged to see at Sherringham, the Grand Saloon was her favorite. More than any other, she wished she might have photographed it, for words simply could not capture its breathtaking beauty as adequately as a lens.

What most won her heart and awed her to speechlessness was the extravagant, lacelike plasterwork that erupted over the ceiling, encrusting it with a profusion of decorative webbing and motifs. Even the towering bay, with its double row of traceried windows, rose beneath a canopy of the riotous, petrified lace.

Vanessa came to stand there now and look out on the formal gardens, in the last of their bloom. Surely, there was an enchantment cast over Sherringham, for even in the short space of a week she'd felt its unmistakable pull. Indeed, not for the first time this day, she must wonder how Lady Gwen could have borne to leave the place, not once to return.

She refocused her thoughts and concentrated on the shrubbery without, clipped to interesting shapes. But instead of greenery, her mind's eye beheld the image of dark, magnetic eyes.

"My dear, there you are!" a high, familiar voice trilled.

Just to her left, a round little couple rose from the settee and hastened to join her at the window. Vanessa had overlooked Mr. and Mrs. Billingsworth, though she'd been informed of their arrival early this morning.

"Dear Vanessa, how are you bearing up, poor girl?" The woman patted Vanessa's hand, her eyes filled with compassion. She chattered on without drawing a breath. "Such tragic news, and we all dined together just last month in Yorkshire."

"Just last month," Mr. Billingsworth echoed, shaking his head gravely.

"Gwendolyn seemed in the bloom of health, positively robust. Didn't I say so that very night, Mr. Billingsworth?"

"Indeed, sweeting, that very night."

"And now she's gone and all so quickly," the woman wailed dramatically. She stopped abruptly and darted a look around. "Why, my dear, you appear quite alone. But of course you are, with our Gwendolyn gone. How foolish of me. You simply must lunch with us. We insist. Don't we Mr. Billingsworth?"

"Actually, I'd hoped Miss Wynters would do me the honor of dining with me," a deep, rich voice sounded directly behind Vanessa.

She spun on her heel, gasping her breath as her eyes collided with those of Adrian Marrable. She felt instantly swallowed by his ebony gaze. A cautioning alarm warned once more from deep within, but now it clanged like a deafening bell.

“You *are* Vanessa Wynters are you not? My aunt's companion?”

Vanessa nodded, unable to coax a single word from her throat, afraid it would come out a miserable squeak if she did. The man positively towered over her, a dark, impressive figure. Again she sensed the tension enveloping him, palpable and barely leashed.

He studied her closely. “Forgive me. We have not been introduced. I am—”

“The panther,” she murmured, the words slipping past her lips before she could stop them. Heat shot to her cheeks as she stood in utter shock of herself. She cleared her throat. “I—I mean, I recognized the coat-of-arms on your carriage, the black panther. You are Viscount Marrable.”

Maybe God would be kind and open a wide crack in the floor for her to jump in, she thought wildly. She was about to die from acute mortification anyway.

The viscount tilted his head and gave her a quizzical look. Vanessa felt herself shrink under his penetrating stare, causing him to loom even larger before her eyes.

The side of his mouth twitched. “I've only arrived this hour, as you are obviously aware. My brother's wife was rather terse, as those things tend to be. I regret I know almost nothing of my aunt's passing. I am told you were with her at the time.”

“Y-Yes,” Vanessa managed. “She died in my arms.”

At that, a servant appeared at the door and announced the luncheon was served.

The viscount proffered his arm. “I shall be interested in learning all you can tell me of my aunt's last hours, and anything else you might offer.”

Vanessa found she could not decline. Had he not exhibited a fine devotion to Lady Gwendolyn, despite his lateness to the service? Surely, she could answer his questions before she departed Sherringham.

Laying her hand atop his arm, Vanessa allowed the Viscount to escort her from the room.

If startled looks followed their withdrawal, she remained wholly unaware of them, for Adrian Marrable had trapped her in his midnight gaze once more, and she found she could look upon no other.

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As Lord Marrable conducted Vanessa through the great double doors of the banqueting hall, she pulled her gaze from his and transferred it to the immense, medieval-style chamber, wholly dissimilar to the saloon.

The ceiling arced two stories high over a space seventy, perhaps eighty, feet in length. Enormous triple windows filled one wall, glowing with stained glass, as did a row of smaller trefoil windows above them. Oak paneling warmed the remaining walls while elaborate, carved woodwork crowned the doors. Pennants, antlers, and huge bronze chandeliers further enhanced the decor, lending it a masculine air.

As the viscount guided Vanessa left of the banqueting table, she felt a muscle tense in his arm, beneath her fingers.

“The hall dates to Elizabeth's reign,” he offered abruptly, unexpectedly, as they proceeded toward the chamber's far end.

Warmth spread through Vanessa as she realized he'd been watching her.

“It served as an entrance for many years but fell into disuse over time. My great-grandfather remodeled it, preserving many period elements while still satisfying his personal tastes. Does it meet with your approval?”

Surprised he would ask her opinion, Vanessa kept her gaze studiously fixed on the opposite end of the room. There a massive crenellated chimneypiece scaled the wall. "Very much so. I find all at Sherringham enthralling, though I confess to know little of architectural styles."

She moistened her lips, pleased she'd been able to complete two coherent sentences without faltering. Emboldened, she pressed on.

"In my travels with Lady Gwendolyn, I encountered nothing to compare to Royal Sherringham, though I understand some say it rivals its neighbor, Eastnor Castle."

"And some say it surpasses it."

His clipped words took her aback. Naturally, he would be proud and defensive of his own estate. But, had he mistaken her meaning? Or was it the reminder of his aunt's long absence that sharpened his voice? Yet, somehow, she'd detected no censure in his tone.

Vanessa stole a sideways glance of him, mindful of his own architectural accomplishment—the lyrical pavilion in the glade. It struck her as incongruous that this forbidding man should create something infused with such passion, light, and grace. And certainly with love.

If he'd built the Orangery for his last viscountess, as Geoffrey claimed, then surely he'd loved her to excess. Perhaps that explained the barrier she sensed surrounded him, shielding a heart still cleaved with pain.

"I've not had occasion to visit Eastnor and own no opinion of it," she said at last, attempting to repair any misunderstanding she'd wrought.

As he brought her to the chair, right of his own at the table's head, she mastered her nerves enough to look directly at him and hold his gaze with her own.

"In truth, I cannot imagine a place lovelier than Sherringham. I would explore every nook had I the time or opportunity. And your permission, of course, Lord Marrable."

As the words left her lips, a frigid draft of air swept over her. Vanessa tried to suppress the shiver that ran through her, hoping it went unnoticed as she withdrew her hand from the viscount's arm.

Seeing his brows deepen, she assumed her seat and gave her attention to the table, gleaming with a plentitude of silver, crystal, and china. Along its extensive length, arrangements of white lilies, Lady Gwen's favorite, alternated with fruit laden epergnes and porcelain baskets, all beribboned with black. Meanwhile, as etiquette decreed, Lord Marrable remained standing as the others found their places.

Majel, acting as hostess, entered last on the arm of the aged Earl Silverbrooke, the highest ranking man present, after the host. She took her seat at the table's far end in the hostess' place of honor. Vanessa observed Lawrence moving to join Majel there and was mindful of his own expectations this day. Had it not been for the viscount's arrival, Lawrence would now be presiding over the funeral feast.

Cissy and Lord Henry drew Vanessa's attention as they settled directly across from her. Meanwhile, servants helped Sir Fotheringgay, the Marrable's octogenarian cousin, many times removed, into the chair to Vanessa's immediate right. He gave her a genial nod, then bent to inspect the array of silver flanking his plate and began counting it.

As Lord Marrable seated himself, Cissy leaned toward her brother, wearing a slightly crooked smile. "I see you're still defying convention, Adrian." She spoke in a low, mischievous tone, sending a glance to Majel and Earl Silverbrooke at the table's opposite end. "Fortunate for you, the earl has no wife, though I'm not certain Countess Hove will soon forgive you."

Vanessa's stomach did a somersault. She realized, as a matter of precedence, the countess should have been the viscount's dining partner, being the lady of highest rank attending. Once

more, Vanessa found herself where she did not belong. And though the viscount, himself, had bid her join him, she'd usurped a privileged place. Vanessa pressed her lashes shut. True, she was born to the gentry, but she was likely the least ranking guest in the hall.

“Vanessa, dear, don't be alarmed,” Cissy heartened as if reading her thoughts. “Adrian will enjoy your company far more than Countess Hove's.”

Startled by the comment, Vanessa quickly glanced up at Cissy, but found she'd already turned to her brother, eyes twinkling.

“Oh course, you might have allowed Henry or me to properly present Vanessa to you before capturing her away to yourself. Naughty man, you best not have smutched her reputation. Auntie would never forgive you, nor shall I. Vanessa is an absolute gem.”

Vanessa's cheeks flamed with embarrassment. She had grown supremely fond of Lady Gwen's convivial niece and was flattered by her words, but what was she about at the moment?

Cissy opened her mouth to speak again but Lord Marrable leveled her a quelling look. Cissy instantly quieted, but in the next instant, broke into a wide, irrepressible grin.

In keeping with the formality of the occasion, a retinue of servants attended the guests, stationed several paces behind their chairs. The butler maintained his position directly behind the viscount, coordinating the entire affair—ringing in each course with timed precision, ensuring his staff's smooth efficiency, and seeing to the viscount's personal needs.

Polite conversation flowed along the table as the courses arrived, beginning with the soup and fish dishes—a consommé and poached salmon. Majel received praise for the selections, and Lawrence for the wines, all drawn from a list of Lady Gwendolyn's favorites and served in her memory.

Lord Marrable remained silent as Cissy took it upon herself to spur conversation and keep alive an active exchange. They made their way through the meat dishes with conversation centered around fond memories of Lady Gwendolyn and humorous incidents from the Marrables' childhood years. Much was made of how Lady Gwen would mercilessly dress them in costumes and pose them for hours for her “allegorical” photographs.

As the servants cleared the soiled dishes and refreshed the wine, Cissy aimed a number of comments directly at Lord Marrable, in an obvious effort to coax him from his silence.

“If you don't know it brother, Vanessa was great friends with Auntie as well as her companion. She was also Auntie's personal protégée.”

The viscount's gaze slipped to Vanessa then back to his sister. “Few escaped Aunt Gwen's camera or her enthusiasm for photography,” he commented, breaking his silence at last. “I'm not surprised she made a convert of Miss Wynters.”

“It's *Mrs.* Wynters, actually,” Vanessa clarified. “And she didn't have to make a convert of me. I truly love the medium.”

The viscount's eyes swung to hers, but she continued, trying to ignore the sudden intensity of his gaze. Trying to master the sudden tremor in her hands.

“I've not a jot of artistic ability, you see. Photography is more a matter of technical knowledge and applied skill, as opposed to the sort of talent required for sketching and oils.”

“Vanessa, you are too modest!” Cissy exclaimed, leaning forward and nearly tipping over the footed glass of lemon ice the servant was attempting to set before her. “Aunt Gwen wrote that you are truly gifted—'intuitive,' she said. And photography is most certainly an art, and one at which you excel.”

Cissy sat back in her chair as the servants offered an assortment of jellies, blancmange, and small iced cakes. When they withdrew, she leaned forward once more.

“Aunt Gwen's words were not mere flattery. She sent along bundles of photographs to Sherringham—both hers and yours, Vanessa—from all your travels. She instructed they be held in storage here.”

Vanessa acknowledged Cissy's statements with a nod. Lady Gwen had graciously made the offer, knowing Vanessa had no home of her own at which to keep them, and no relations closer than her cousins.

“I've seen your work for myself,” Cissy chattered on. “Your photographs are superb. You should see them too, Adrian. They are stored in the west library. In fact, the last package was posted from Brussels, before Aunt Gwen and Vanessa departed for France.”

Lord Henry, who'd been listening attentively, wiped his mouth with his napkin and set it aside. “That arrived rather swiftly, wouldn't you say? Lady Gwendolyn died shortly after arriving in Paris. Isn't that so?”

Multiple pairs of eyes turned toward Vanessa and she found herself the center of attention.

“Yes, we'd arrived only three days before. I feel I should have recognized the oncoming signs. But then, they were unremarkable. Even Lady Gwen discounted their importance. She always enjoyed excellent health and assumed she was simply fatigued.”

The viscount eased back in his chair, contemplating Vanessa. “I'd like to hear the details if you are up to it.”

“Adrian, you cannot be serious,” Cissy objected. “We are still in the midst of the sweets course.”

“I don't mind,” Vanessa offered. “And really, there's no better time. I'll be leaving Sherringham presently.”

Instantly, an icy thread of air spiraled about her, causing the fine hairs to raise along her arm and the back of her neck. Once again Vanessa suppressed a shiver passing over her. Sherringham, she decided, was plagued by a distinct problem with drafts.

“What of these signs?” Lord Henry's voice drew her back to the moment. “Had Lady Gwen been ill during the weeks previous to the attacks?”

“Not noticeably so. She experienced a few minor headaches, nothing more. Then, during an outing on our second day in Paris, we were photographing on the Champs-Élysées. Lady Gwen had finished adjusting her camera to her satisfaction and was peering through the lens when her vision blurred in that eye. Her right eye.” Vanessa tapped a finger to her cheekbone beneath her own. “I took the photograph for her and we returned to our suite directly.”

“Lady Gwen slept for a time. When she awakened, she seemed quite well, her vision and energy restored. So much so, that same evening we attended a small dinner party. At one point, she experienced some difficulty understanding what was being said. She waved it away as one of the nuisances of advancing age. I realize now, the headaches and vision and hearing problems were all indications of an oncoming attack.”

The viscount's gaze remained fastened on Vanessa and, if possible, intensified as she began to describe Lady Gwen's passing. The images loomed to life as she relived each tragic moment.

“The first attack came during the night.” Vanessa's voice dropped to a near whisper. “Evidently, Lady Gwen had risen from her bed some time before. I awoke to the sound of her footsteps, pacing the floor.”

In truth, Lady Gwen paced the floor most nights. A more restless soul, Vanessa had never encountered. She had suspected Lady Gwen experienced some physical ailment that prevented her from lying abed prone for any extended length of time. Vanessa encouraged her to see the

doctor, but Lady Gwen refused, jesting she was working out the troubles of the world when she walked the nights, and the world certainly needed that, she assured.

On this particular night, Vanessa rose to check on her, as was her custom.

“I was approaching the door to the front room, when I heard Lady Gwen fall. The attack incapacitated her, leaving her paralyzed along her right side and her speech badly slurred. I managed to lift her and assist her into bed, then sent immediately for the physician.”

The side of her face sagged most distressingly, the muscles having given way, and her right arm and leg were utterly useless. Vanessa recalled her own anguish in that moment and her utter powerlessness. The dear lady deserved nothing so wretched to befall her.

“Lady Gwendolyn rested, comfortably I believe, as we awaited the doctor.”

Comfortably, yes, until she remembered her small Bible. Vanessa could not explain what happened next.

Lady Gwen became greatly agitated and through her thick speech, implored Vanessa to find the book. When Vanessa brought it to her bedside, Lady Gwen struggled to voice two words and did so again and again. “Burn it! Burn it!” she demanded urgently. Lady Gwen would not be calmed until Vanessa promised she would do as she requested.

“The doctor had only just arrived, when Lady Gwen suffered a second, massive attack. I was holding her, helping her take a sip of water when the fit seized her.”

“And you say the second stroke took her?” Lord Henry queried. “Swiftly, I hope.”

Vanessa nodded. “She suffered little. I wired Sherringham at once. Fortunately, Lawrence was in residence to receive it and came at once.”

Lord Marrable retracted his dark gaze from her and leveled it down the length of the table at his brother. Vanessa was unsure what she saw in his eyes, only that he looked displeased.

“Thank heaven Lawrence came to your aid so promptly,” Lord Henry declared.

Vanessa avoided Lord Marrable's eyes which she sensed had returned to her. Instead, she concentrated on those last moments in Paris.

The small Bible lay forgotten until Vanessa was vacating the Paris suite to return to England with Lawrence and Lady Gwen's coffin. At the last moment, she tucked the volume in her own case. She was glad now she hadn't fulfilled Lady Gwen's strange request, but thought to bury it with her instead.

She looked up to find that the family solicitor, Mr. Whitmore, had come to stand by the viscount's side and was saying something to his ear.

Cissy waited for him to finish before taking up the conversation and steering it into a new vein.

“Vanessa is compiling a mourning album for the family, Adrian. Isn't that splendid of her? She held the sittings yesterday afternoon.”

“Are the portraits ready to be viewed?” Lord Henry asked with marked enthusiasm. His interest in photography, or at least the finished product, was almost as keen as young Geoffrey's.

“Actually, I intend to develop the plates at my cousin's home in Hampshire, where they can provide me with space for a temporary darkroom.”

“I didn't know it was possible to travel with exposed plates.” Surprisingly, the question came from Lord Marrable.

Vanessa studied her hands, avoiding his eyes. “If one uses the 'dry' process, then yes. The gelatin plates are fitted into a specially designed box which protects them. I will personally carry it on the train.”

Cissy's eyes grew suddenly wide. "Vanessa, what of my brother? He must be included in the album. You could pose him now and take the plate with you."

Vanessa's heart skipped a beat. "I fear there is not nearly time enough. I've a train to catch in Hereford."

An arctic coolness pooled over her, causing Vanessa to stiffen. Perhaps it was good she was leaving, she decided, before she caught her death of cold.

She consulted the watch attached to her bodice. "Actually, I see I should gather my things now. It's drawing near time for me to depart."

In all honesty, there was a wide margin of time to spare, but after discussing Lady Gwen's demise, she suddenly craved the privacy of her room. And a warm jacket.

"If you will excuse me . . ." Vanessa started to rise but suddenly felt the weight of a hand upon her right shoulder, pressing her firmly back down into her chair.

With a gasp, she plopped ungracefully onto her seat, crushing her bustle as she did. Shocked by the rudeness of the gesture, she looked to Sir Fotheringgay to her right. But his hands were occupied with his spoon and fork as he sampled the jellies and cakes.

"Leave?" Mr. Whitmore, who still stood by the viscount's side, blustered aloud, his shrubby brows shooting heavenward. "You cannot leave, Mrs. Wynters. Not yet. You are among those named in Lady Gwendolyn's will."

Surprise lit the eyes of all who turned to her, excepting at the table's far end where Majel's narrowed to slits.

Chapter 3

Whether she was relieved or disappointed that Mr. Whitmore delayed the viscount in the banquet hall, Vanessa had yet to resolve.

But then Cissy and Lord Henry allowed her not a moment to ponder it. They quickly took her under wing and swept her along with them, the solicitor having promised an immediate reading of the will to accommodate Vanessa's pressing schedule.

Lawrence joined them now as they quit the hall and headed for the family's private "sitting library." He chatted easily, seeming much more the man she'd known this week past. *Seeming* so. Admittedly, she wasn't paying close attention. Her mind still spun as they approached the library doors.

Lady Gwen had included her in her will, likely to bequeath her some small memento. That would have been most kind of her, and Vanessa felt deeply appreciative. At the same time, she dearly hoped she would not miss her train.

It wasn't so much the cost of her ticket which would be forfeit that concerned her. Once she arrived at her cousin's in Hampshire, she must promptly begin advertising for a new position. She could not afford to delay. Though her late husband had not left her totally bereft, he had not left her financially secure either. She hoped to find a new position soon, though she'd be fortunate to find one half as satisfying or fulfilling as the one she enjoyed with Lady Gwendolyn.

The future that awaited her promised to be lonely, isolating. Whether she served as a companion or governess, she would be a genteel woman caught in that restricted, nebulous realm, existing above the household's hired servants but below the family, neither belonging nor associating with either beyond her duties.

No, she could not hope for such a close association with her next employer as that which she'd experienced with Lady Gwen. They shared a true friendship, special, irreplaceable. Indeed, they had very much been companions to each other. Vanessa confessed, she'd not known a moment's loneliness since entering Lady Gwen's employ,

Following Cissy and Lord Henry, Vanessa crossed the library threshold on Lawrence's arm.

The room proved spacious, though smaller in scale than most she'd seen at Sherringham. Recessed bookcases stretched along the walls, appearing part of the architecture, touched with Gothic overtones.

Overstuffed sofas surrounded a wide fireplace. Above its mantel, a lion and a unicorn supported the Marrantable Achievement of Arms, the spotted panther rearing from its crest. Inscribed on the riband beneath the shield appeared the motto "Fierce when roused."

Vanessa smiled inwardly, remembering the viscount's look when he first arrived at the funeral.

At the room's far end loomed a great hexagonal bay, its windows soaring to an extravagant height with jewel-tone coats-of-arms painted into the upper lights. Situated in the bay's alcove stood a large double library desk of mahogany and a deep leather chair behind it. Additional chairs, also leather, had been drawn forward and positioned in semicircular fashion, facing the desk and bay.

Feeling somewhat out-of-place, Vanessa indicated to Lawrence that she preferred to take the chair on the far left, allowing the family to be seated together. He graciously led her there then assumed the seat beside her. Cissy and Lord Henry took the chairs to the right, and Majel and her husband, trailing into the library last, installed themselves on the far-most right.

Mindful of the passing time, Vanessa slipped a glance to her watch and wondered how long they would wait before the viscount and Mr. Whitmore appeared. Several moments later, the men strode into the room.

Lord Marrable, his features once more an unreadable mask, seated himself behind the great desk. Presumably he did so in order to observe the others, or so it seemed to Vanessa.

Mr. Whitmore, a sober, heavy-jawed man with untamed brows and hair, assumed his place to the left of the desk and withdrew an envelope from his jacket. Adjusting his spectacles, he cleared his throat.

“My Lord Marrable,” he began in a gritty voice that oddly suited his gruff looks. “Lord and Lady Pendergast, Lord and Lady Norland, Mr. Marrable, Mrs. Wynters, as you know by your requested presence here, Lady Gwendolyn has named you in the disposition of her personal holdings. In keeping with my promise to Mrs. Wynters to expedite matters, let us begin.”

The milky-white paper crackled beneath his fingers as he removed it from the envelope and unfolded its creases.

“The document is dated May 9, 1882, four months prior to Lady Gwendolyn's death. To my knowledge it is her most recent and last statement of her wishes.” He peered over the tops of his glasses at those seated before him. “Unless anyone present is otherwise aware.”

Majel eyed Vanessa with a hooded look. “Mrs. Wynters would know better than any of us. She rarely left Auntie's side and helped her conduct all her activities. Or so I'm told.” Her lips slanted into a razor-thin smile.

Vanessa's stomach tightened to a thick knot, just as it had this morning in Knights Chapel when Majel baldly implied that she'd prevented Lady Gwen from returning to Sherringham. Did she now suggest something more sinister? Did Majel actually imagine she'd persuaded Lady Gwen to alter her will to benefit herself?

Vanessa raised her chin. “I know of no other will. I didn't know of this one.”

Majel lifted a brow of disbelief at that. “You did accompany her to the solicitor's office on the date mentioned did you not?”

Vanessa met her gaze levelly, piqued by Majel's innuendos. “Yes, of course, but I was not present in her meeting with Mr. Engle, nor was I aware of her purpose for seeing him that day. She did not reveal it to me, nor did I expect her to do so.”

Mr. Whitmore cleared the roughness noisily from his throat, gaining everyone's attention. “Mrs. Wynters, did Lady Gwendolyn have occasion to seek legal counsel again after May ninth?”

“To my knowledge, no.”

“Then, unless proven otherwise, this document stands as her last will. Now, let us begin.” He adjusted his spectacles once more then commenced reading.

“I, Gwendolyn Alicen Marrable of Royal Sherringham in Herefordshire, England, daughter of the late Right Honorable Talbot Marrable, sister to the late Right Honorable Lionel Marrable, and aunt to the Right Honorable Adrian Marrable, current and fifteenth viscount of that line, being of sound and disposing mind and memory do hereby declare this to be my Final Will and Testament.

“Being a woman born to privilege, but having remained a maiden lady throughout my life, I own no great private wealth. That is to say, I hold no lands or properties of which to dispose, my person having ever relied upon the munificence of the Marrable men for my support, first, upon that of my father, next my brother, and finally, my nephew, all viscounts of the House of Marrable. I am compelled to add in regard to all three, their generosity rose high above duty and for that I am endlessly grateful.”

The corners of Vanessa's mouth lifted in a smile. She'd encountered many a grand lady too stingy of heart to offer even a modicum of gratitude when due. Lady Gwendolyn, however, had always been unsparing in her appreciation and praise. It was but one of her endearing qualities.

Mr. Whitmore continued, his growly voice providing a curious contrast to the feminine tone of the words he read from the page.

“I do leave a number of personal possessions of value and herein set forth my wishes for their disbursements. First, to my nephews and nieces, Adrian, Lawrence, Majel, and Cecilia, fondly known as Cissy, I leave you first and foremost my love which you ever enjoyed in life—during your growing years, and those more mature, and of late, during my prolonged absence and travels. Be assured my love continues to flow to you, for I believe such things are possible. Death is no barrier to strong felt emotions such as love.”

Lady Gwen's sentiments did not surprise Vanessa. She knew Lady Gwen believed unfalteringly in life in the Hereafter. She also believed that the earthly and spiritual planes coexisted, and that souls could easily transcend them should passions or purpose move them to such, and if the Almighty allowed it.

Mr. Whitmore rumbled on. “Of a more tangible nature, there is the matter of my personal apparel including my garments and varied accessories that include shoes, hats, purses, gloves, fans, muffs, parasols, and the like. I do exclude, however, my jewelry from this particular bequest. Still, these habiliments are of significant value, and I have considered their disbursal at some length.

“I am mindful that both my nephews are well situated but without wives, and that both my nieces are also well situated with husbands who can amply afford for them.

“Therefore, recognizing that my relations have no identifiable need for my personal apparel, I do instruct that my garments, those for indoors and outdoors wear, and all my accessories, exclusive of my jewelry, be sold in their entirety and that the proceeds be distributed to the fund established by my nephew, Adrian, Lord Marrable, to provide for the widows and orphans of the coalminers working the Marrable mines. Sustaining them in their need is the least we Marrables can do as the mines have been the basis of our family's wealth for the past century.”

Vanessa glanced to the viscount, surprised a second time this day by the man. In the same instant, Majel thrust to her feet.

“But there are furs!” she cried. “Full-length mantles and coats of sable and chinchilla. And there are gowns by Worth and costly trimmings. Surely she does not mean to include the furs, or for the clothes to be sold with their embellishments.”

Mr. Whitmore pursed his lips as he stared at Majel. “Lady Gwendolyn specifies the garments, ‘those for indoors *and* outdoors wear,’ are to be ‘sold in their entirety.’”

“But there are edgings of marten and fox, rain fringe of jet. And what of the silk shawls from Egypt and their embroideries? They could all be reworked.”

Mr. Whitmore removed his spectacles, his eyes fired with impatience. “The sale will be open to all. Might I suggest your ladyship purchase what pieces interest you at that time and thus make a generous contribution to the widows and orphans fund?”

At Mr. Whitmore's suggestion, Majel went rigid but behind the desk Adrian Marrable broke into a wide grin. The sight of that dazzling smile, slashing his features, nearly caused Vanessa's heart to stop.

“Whitmore, you've earned your entire year's retainer this day.” The viscount chuckled.

Vanessa blinked at that. The man actually chuckled. The others stared at him too, as if it were a singular event. Excepting Majel, who glared daggers at her brother.

He settled deeper into the leather chair, his smile settling into a pleasant line. "I concur and intend to hearten all attending the sale to be most liberal in their purchases and offer top coin."

As his smile lingered, Vanessa felt something inexplicable stir deep inside her. She strove to ignore it, not wishing to place a name to it.

All seriousness, Mr. Whitmore replaced his glasses and straightened his papers. "Where were we?" He scanned the page for his place.

"As to the disbursal of my jewelry, I have ever considered myself fortunate to possess a fine collection. For the most part, the pieces were inherited through my mother and through her maternal line. My collection also contains a number of prime items that I confess, somewhat blushing, were gifts from admirers over the years."

A soft rumble of laughter rolled through the group.

"In contemplating the dispersal of my jewels, I am again reminded of my nephews' marital status and of my nieces' positions."

Majel shot to her feet once more. "She cannot mean to leave her jewels to the orphans too! Or to the *widows*." She swiveled in place, shooting a white-hot look at Vanessa.

From the corner of her eyes, Vanessa glimpsed the viscount's gaze boring into her. Lord help her. Lady Gwen couldn't have left *her* all her jewels. At least, she hoped not. It would then most certainly appear she'd manipulated her elderly employer and taken complete advantage of her.

Vanessa sought to calm herself. Perhaps it was merely the mention of her widowed status that netted the viscount's interest. She doubted it, yet her marital status had not been specified during the luncheon, only that she was a Mrs. rather than a Miss. The conversation had then veered to another topic, as she remembered.

Could Lord Marrable have assumed her to be still married, abandoning a husband for some outrageous reason to trail over Britain and the Continent with his aunt? She dismissed the thought as preposterous, her reasoning strained.

Mr. Whitmore again cleared his throat. "Lady Pendergast, if I might continue—"

"Do sit down, sister," Cissy pleaded, turning to Majel. "We must finish or Vanessa will miss her train."

"And what a pity that would be," Majel snipped, reseating herself.

Mr. Whitmore skimmed the page, then leafed to the next. "Ah, yes. Here, Lady Gwendolyn becomes personal in her address once more. It reads as follows:

"Adrian, you are heir to the family's famed jewels, bestowed upon the Viscounts Marrable through our famous, and rather infamous, ancestral relation, Leonine Marrable, mistress to Charles II. It is my hope you will recover them in time to come, if you have not done so in fact already. Their loss is a loss to all Marrables as it has ever been the special treasure about which we Marrables are most fond of boasting, however scandalously they were acquired."

Famed jewels? Charles II's mistress? Vanessa found this a fascinating revelation. But they had slipped from the viscount's possession somehow. She saw now that his smile had vanished, his look darkening once more.

"But I digress"—Mr. Whitmore read on—"Adrian, your personal wealth allows you to purchase whatever gems you wish, should you have the inclination or again take a wife. You have no need for my trifles. Therefore, I leave you but one item from my own collection, one by which to remember me.

"Knowing your love of history and antiquities, I have chosen a seal ring, once belonging to one of the minor maharajahs of Jaipur a century ago. You will see it is set with an oval sapphire which has been carved in a flowing script with the maharajah's name. When you look on it,

remember the woman who enjoyed a zest and passion for life. I would that your own passions be reborn.

“Presumably, if this paper is open to your eyes, then I am dead, so I will be perfectly frank and say what needs to be said. Let go the pains of the past, Adrian. Before your great-grandfather changed the Marrable motto, the older one read *Virescit vulnere virtus*. Courage grows strong at a wound. So does love.”

Mr. Whitmore fell silent as Lord Marrable rose and moved to the window. Vanessa could sense the barriers thickening about him as he gave his back to all in the room and stood looking out onto the gardens and lawns. Lady Gwen had touched upon an unspeakable topic, the same one hinted at earlier in Knights Chapel. It was obviously bound up with Lord Marrable's wives, either one or both.

Vanessa suddenly wished she were already on her train, headed for Hampshire. She was an outsider here and shouldn't be privy to such personal matters.

Mr. Whitmore reached into his jacket and withdrew a small, velvet-covered box. He pondered Lord Marrable's back, obviously uncertain whether to disturb him. Cissy, owning no such reticence, sprang to her feet and accepted the box for her brother. As she opened it, Vanessa spied a flash of bright gold and the deep blue of the sapphire.

“How marvelously thoughtful of Aunt Gwen.” Cissy's voice sparkled as she moved to the viscount's side. “Look, Adrian. Have you ever seen a ring so fine?”

Lord Marrable took the box and, briefly, he and Cissy spoke in low tones. A moment later, he turned and reseated himself, his features shuttered. Once Cissy settled herself, he gestured for Mr. Whitmore to continue.

“Y-Yes.” Mr. Whitmore fumbled his spectacles back in place on the bridge of his nose. “The next passage is directed to Mr. Lawrence Marrable. It reads as follows:

“Lawrence, I am mindful of your own wide interests. In particular, I am mindful of your love of beauty, extravagance, and also, shall we say, of your unbridled generosity toward the ladies.”

Lawrence shifted self-consciously in his seat.

“These words are intended with your best interest at heart, so again I will be frank. I encourage you to employ restraint in your life, to rule over your impulses. It is precisely because of those impulses, sometimes given to excessive and, in certain cases, undeserved magnanimity, I fear you might allow portions of my small though precious collection to trickle to others outside the family.

“Thus, Lawrence, knowing you are well able to provide for any lady who draws your interest, I leave you also with a single, but carefully chosen, memento by which to remember me. In this case, a cameo, its profile carved of my own likeness at the workshops outside the ruins of Pompeii.”

Vanessa recalled the trip, recalled stumbling onto the place after visiting the ancient city and the cameo being carved.

“I have had it fashioned into a stickpin of purest gold and set with a small diamond. When you look on it, remember a woman whose own impulses led to varying consequences, but who loved greatly in this life, loved you most dearly, and would see you set your world aright.”

Aware Lawrence might feel some embarrassment at the moment, Vanessa kept her gaze from him as he received the velvet-boxed gift from Mr. Whitmore. Evidently, Lawrence's proclivities had met with Lady Gwen's disapproval. He was an attractive man who doubtless had many lady admirers and who appreciated their beauty as well. She conceded to not having been wholly

unaffected herself when she first met him. He was an engaging man with golden good looks. And yet . . .

Dare she admit it? Lawrence paled from thought when his brother, Adrian, appeared. It seemed unfair, congenial Lawrence overshadowed by his dark, unapproachable brother.

Mr. Whitmore returned to the desk and, after taking a sip of water from a glass on a small silver tray there, he took up the will once more.

“The message now turns to the ladies,” he announced.

Majel shifted forward in her chair, sending a confident glance to Cissy.

“Majel and Cissy, again I will be plain. You both enjoy coffers heaped with jewelry. Majel, you wait with your husband for an expected inheritance. When the time of your father-in-law's passing occurs, you will rise in status higher than your own brother, being elevated to the rank of countess. Though you do not wish your father-in-law ill, I am sure, I know you look forward with great anticipation to that day. At that time, you will have access to the Pendergast jewels and though not to compare with the Marrable jewels, I understand they would leave most women breathless.”

Majel held her head high, sliding a superior look to her brother Adrian.

“My dear Cissy, your husband spoils you with countless baubles. It is plain to see he adores you, though personally I encourage him, like Lawrence, to exercise more restraint lest he soon exhaust his fortune on your account. You know I say this with love, for to enjoy a husband's devotion and generosity is in itself a priceless gift.

“Therefore, carefully considering all this, and also respecting that many of the jewels in my collection are family heirlooms, owning sentimental as well as actual value, it is my wish for them to be passed down through the female line, ensuring they stay within the family. I hereby bequeath them to you, my nieces, Majel and Cissy, to be divided equally and equitably between you. I encourage you to continue this tradition and pass the pieces on through your own daughters and your daughters' daughters, keeping them within the bloodline.”

Majel expelled a breath, obviously relieved. As her gaze sliced to Cissy, Vanessa felt sorry for the younger woman. The disposition of Lady Gwendolyn's jewels was far from settled.

Mr. Whitmore informed the sisters the jewelry was being kept in Lord Marrable's safe and asked that they wait until after the reading before taking possession of it.

“Lady Gwendolyn's will now turns to Mrs. Wynters,” Mr. Whitmore informed.

Vanessa dropped her gaze to her lap as the others directed their attention her way.

“As you are all well aware, for over twenty-five years I have experimented with photography. It is a passion and a pursuit that I have enjoyed immensely and for which I have spared little expense. To date, there are literally hundreds, if not a thousand or more, of my photographs stored at Sherringham. These I leave to my nephews and nieces jointly and appoint Adrian to oversee any and all final decisions concerning their fate. Divide them as you please, or keep them together in a single collection, as you will, but do enjoy them.

“As regards my photographic equipment and supplies, however, these, in their entirety, I bequeath with great joy and satisfaction to my dear friend and companion, Mrs. Vanessa Wynters.”

Vanessa's jaw dropped, her gaze flying to the solicitor. “In their entirety?”

“Why?” Majel leaned forward of her chair to better view Vanessa. “Is any of it valuable?”

“Majel, do shut up!” Lawrence clipped out, his tone sharp with impatience. “Mr. Whitmore, proceed.”

“Yes, here we are. Oh, and yes to you Mrs. Wynters. All photographic equipment and supplies 'in their entirety' are bequeathed to you. Now, I'll begin where I left off.

“My dear Vanessa, you possess an innate talent, which in only two years' time is already impressive and still reaching toward its full potential. I realize that my death will consequently result in your lack of employment. As you are widowed and have little family on which to rely, you will necessarily feel forced to seek a new position elsewhere.”

Vanessa kept her gaze fastened on the solicitor, aware of the others' directed at her. Oddly, she felt the weight of the viscount's gaze most of all.

“Vanessa, do not. Do not seek another position, I pray you. Instead, I encourage you to be daring, to take a chance—on life and on yourself. You are a first rate photographer with an excellent eye, as they say. Pursue your gift, my dear. Develop your skills to your fullest potential.

“To help you to that end, I have written letters of introduction to some of the leading studios in London. Their owners are long acquaintances of mine. Hopefully, you will gain entrance there, if that is your wish. Another possibility you might consider is to assemble your photographs from our journeys and collect them into a book for publication. Picture travelogues are all the passion these days and should bring you a tidy sum.

“You must find your own way, Vanessa, create your own special niche in the field. This will not be easy. It is difficult for a woman to support herself, even in these enlightened times. Still, I encourage you to attempt to establish yourself in photography. With that in mind, I call upon my nephew, Adrian, to lend his assistance.”

Vanessa's gaze leaped to Lord Marrable's and found surprise equal to her own in their depths.

“Adrian, it is my wish for you to be in fact, Mrs. Wynters' benefactor, temporarily at least, by assigning to her whatever remains in my accounts of my personal annual allowance.

“In closing, I encourage you, my dear nephews and nieces, to watch over one another. Marrable blood is strong and constant and binds you together always.

“And now I do close, content in the knowledge that as you read these words I will have taken up my long rest and sleep at Royal Sherringham.”

Everyone sat silent as Mr. Whitmore placed Lady Gwendolyn's will on the desk, open for all to review. He then delivered into Vanessa's hands a neat stack of letters tied with a blue satin ribbon.

One by one, those in the room began to rise from their chairs. Lord Marrable remained seated, however, giving his attention to a slim ledger he'd withdrawn from a drawer. At the same time, he bid the solicitor to his side.

“So, Vanessa, what will you do?” Lawrence smiled, offering her a hand as she rose to her feet.

“I'm not sure. There is so much to think on. I imagine I'll have time enough to sort it out in Hampshire.”

She glanced to Mr. Whitmore who bent to examine something in the viscount's book and then straightened and offered some comment.

Vanessa turned back to Lawrence. “Excuse me. I should arrange for the equipment and supplies to be sent on. I really must hurry if I am to catch my train.”

Vanessa moved to stand before the wide desk and waited for Mr. Whitmore to conclude his conversation with the viscount. When he did, the viscount made a notation in his book that caused the solicitor's brows to rise. The men's eyes then turned to her in unison. She took a self-

conscious swallow, but before she could open her mouth to make her request, Mr. Whitmore began to speak.

“Mrs. Wynters, on reviewing Lady Gwendolyn's account, Lord Marrable has noted that, it now being September, only one-fifth of the funds allotted his aunt annually now remain. They are deposited the first of each December, you see, which coincides with the anniversary of the late viscount's death and the establishment of the fund.”

“Yes, of course. I understand.” Vanessa's heart sank a little. Not that she hoped for a great sum, but establishing herself in the field of photography would take time and be costly. There was, also, no guarantee she would find entrance into the London studios to help sustain her.

For one brief moment she'd dared entertain the thought of following Lady Gwen's advice. But she didn't see how it would be remotely possible to do so.

“However,” Mr. Whitmore continued, “Lord Marrable, in assuming you wish to pursue your photographic endeavors, desires you have funds enough to carry you for an entire year. Therefore, he proposes to provide you the *full* annual amount, if you decide to follow that course, that is.”

“What?” Majel shrieked from where she now stood, several yards away.

Vanessa ignored the woman's protests, turning widened eyes to Adrian Marrable. She couldn't seem to get her voice to leave her throat.

“I—I don't understand,” she managed at last.

“Lord Marrable means to quintuple this figure.” The solicitor scribbled numbers on a slip of paper and laid it on the desk before her.

Vanessa gasped aloud at the sum staring back. “Oh, but he can't!”

“No, surely he can't!” Majel rushed forward, intent on viewing the figure for herself. But Lord Marrable stayed her with a hard, layered look.

Slowly he rose from his chair and stood to full height.

“I believe I can do as I please,” he said without the trace of a smile, pinning his sister with an icy gaze. “I am, after all, viscount and Master of Sherringham.”

Majel took a step back.

“B-But this amount, your lordship.” Vanessa's words tumbled over one another. “It's far too excessive. And Lady Gwen had much to say of excess in her will, if you remember. I doubt she'd approve.”

Lord Marrable turned toward her, trapping her in his midnight gaze.

“She'd more than approve, Mrs. Wynters. We both know what a generous person she was.”

Generosity surely runs in the Marrable family, she thought to herself.

“But why would you make such an offer? You've seen nothing of my work.”

A light appeared in his eyes. It was like a small glowing window suddenly illumined from somewhere deep inside.

“I trust in my aunt's faith in your abilities and only wish to honor her request. I would also remind you that my sister, Cissy, has seen your work and spent a good portion of the luncheon praising your skills. The offer stands, Mrs. Wynters. The decision is yours.”

Vanessa glanced to the paper again, still stunned by the sudden shift of events. “I—I don't know quite what to say.”

“Say yes,” Cissy urged as she came to Vanessa's side. “Why, I have a sensational idea. You can stay here and begin your new career, photographing Royal Sherringham. It would be a marvelous project for a picture book.”

Lawrence moved to Vanessa's other side. "What a splendid idea. Sherringham is a masterpiece of Gothic Revival architecture and has a long and fascinating history to tell."

"What Lawrence says is true," Cissy quickly added. "We could all help you with the text."

Lawrence pressed closer. "And don't forget the photographs you took on your travels. Aunt Gwen's too. You could publish them in association with her estate. The public is always eager for exotic photographs. Indeed, you *must* stay at Sherringham." A note of eagerness grew in his voice, and he looked to his brother, smiling. "What do you say to that, Adrian?"

An indefinable look entered Lord Marrable's eyes as his gaze passed from Lawrence to Vanessa and back.

"You are welcome to stay at Royal Sherringham for as long as you please, Mrs. Wynters," he said stiffly but graciously, his dark eyes pulling from Lawrence and returning to her.

Cissy grabbed Vanessa's hands at once and turned her toward her. "Do say you will stay. It's a wonderful idea and the books will be wonderful too. Henry and I plan to remain a while longer. Think of the fun it will be."

Vanessa felt quite overcome, but the plan seemed sound and not even Majel voiced further objection. Of course, that had much to do with the silencing hand Lord Pendergast had placed to her shoulder. In truth, Majel appeared ready to burst with emotion.

Vanessa's eyes drew once more to Lord Marrable. "How can I refuse so generous and kind an offer? Yes, I accept and I will happily stay at Sherringham."

A smile rose from the depths of her heart and found her lips. But no sooner than she made the pronouncement, a deathly cold sliced straight through her, stealing her breath away.

Chapter 4

Adrian rode out, his exchange with Lawrence still burning in his brain.

Perhaps he'd been too harsh with his brother yesterday. Perhaps their wires had passed one another, as Lawrence insisted.

Adrian pressed on, feeling the power of the stallion beneath him as the steed's hooves ate up the road. He passed rapidly along the lane, leaving Sherringham, with its brooding towers and pinnacles watching from behind.

His anger remained, unabated, boiling in his veins. Word of Aunt Gwen's death had not reached him for nearly a week. A week! Thank God for Cameron Kincaid. His friend had appeared on his doorstep late at night, bearing Lawrence's telegram which Cameron's uncle had forwarded from the moors of Scotland.

"Did I do wrong to dispatch the wire to Glengyle?" Lawrence had challenged when Adrian took him to task over the matter. "Last we spoke, you were to be salmon fishing with the brother of that runner with whom you've become chums."

"I was with his *uncle*, and Cameron Kincaid is not a 'runner' as you put it, but an inspector with Scotland Yard."

Lawrence waved away his words. "Whatever his post, how the devil should I have known you left Glengyle for London?"

"By the telegram I sent you when I learned of Kincaid's discovery." Adrian moved around his desk. "I expected you to meet me."

"Well, when I didn't appear, you might have assumed I failed to receive *your* telegram," Lawrence countered, then rested back in the deep, cushioned chair, lacing his fingers. "Presumably, my man Wilfred forwarded your wire to Hadleigh Hall where I was grouse shooting. As luck would have it, I left prematurely. Word came from Sherringham that the tiles had arrived from Italy—the ones that are to line the upper fireplace in the Orangery. I departed straightway to inspect the shipment, never having received your missive."

Lawrence rose then and began to pace.

"As it was, I was but a day at Sherringham when a lad from Hereford appeared, delivering Mrs. Wynters' telegram. I needn't tell you, Auntie's death came as quite a shock. I drafted messages to you and our sisters and instructed your butler, Timmons, to wire them on. I then set off for Paris to assist Mrs. Wynters in the bitter task of transporting Auntie home."

He stopped his pacing and faced Adrian.

"I suppose I should have waited for you, brother. I was stricken and not thinking rightly. You were so blasted far away. I simply dashed off to the rescue, as it were. That is what family does in a crisis, after all, especially when one of their own has fallen on foreign ground."

That and, in your case, rush to succor beautiful young women in distress, Adrian added hotly to himself.

Instantly, he upbraided himself. The accusation was undeserved. How did the thought even burrow into his head? True, Lawrence had a weakness for a pretty face, but he had no way of knowing Mrs. Wynters was so exceedingly comely.

Adrian frowned at his own admittance, again wondering from whence it sprang. He expelled a breath, then fixed Lawrence with his gaze.

"Fortunately, Laird Kincaid sent your wire on to his nephew at the Yard and, in turn, Cameron delivered the news to me personally."

And barely in time, Adrian thought to himself as he spurred his horse on. Despite his brother's explanations, he still felt somehow dissatisfied with his meeting with Lawrence.

Leaning into the great black, he welcomed the wind in his face.

He would have never forgiven himself had he missed Aunt Gwendolyn's funeral altogether. It was damnable enough that he hadn't been the one to secure her remains or to arrange or even attend the services for her. He keenly felt the need to have overseen every detail. It mattered. Deeply.

It wasn't just that he loved that dear woman, or that it was his place as head of the Marrable family to have done so. But more, he was the reason she'd lived in self-imposed exile these past years. It remained an open wound in his heart. He knew Aunt Gwen had stayed away from Sherringham specifically to keep her distance from him.

Passing through the twin gatehouses that marked the entrance to Sherringham, Adrian headed along the road that led through Herefordshire's rolling hillside and stretched toward the city. In the far distance to the west loomed the Black Mountains of Wales. The sight of their rugged outline jerked his thoughts back to Scotland and to Glengyle.

Cameron Kincaid was to have joined the fishing party in the Highlands but was delayed at the Yard. The delay proved providential, however. For a third time since their disappearance, one of the Marrable jewels had surfaced. This time the piece appeared not far from the Yard itself, in the posh section of Kensington High Street. On receiving Cameron's news in Glengyle, Adrian had wired immediately to Lawrence and then departed for London.

So many wires, he thought grimly—his, Lawrence's, Cameron's, Mrs. Wynters. It was not surprising they'd crossed, that he'd not received word of his aunt's death for so many days. He had to accept Lawrence owned no fault in the matter, though a devil in him wished to find a place to lay the blame.

Adrian hardened his jaw. Guilt rode him. That was at the root of his anger, he knew. Though he'd tried, he had never gotten a chance to see his aunt again after those fateful days surrounding Olivia's death.

At the time, Aunt Gwen had been overcome by the tragedy. She was doubly stricken when he was accused of his viscountess' death, of tampering with her carriage which led to the fiery accident.

Had Aunt Gwen heard their violent argument earlier that night? Did she believe the accusations even for an instant? But soon, it wasn't Olivia's death alone that shadowed him. The accusations triggered suspicions about the death of his first wife, Clairissa.

People believed what they wished, he reflected bitterly, slowing his horse as the road began to wind downward.

After Olivia's accident and the subsequent investigation surrounding him, Aunt Gwen decided to travel awhile, saying she needed a change after so much distress. Privately, the doctor agreed. It would be therapeutic for her to get away from Sherringham where both the viscountesses' tragedies had taken place.

Adrian gave in to her wishes and increased her personal allowance so she might experience not a moment's worry in that regard. A maiden lady, thirty some odd years old and seemingly stable, served as her companion. But, to his understanding, the woman proved shockingly unreliable when she eloped across the Scots border with one of his aunt's poet friends.

He learned through his sister that their aunt had found another lady to accompany her, this one younger than her last companion but quite acceptable. That was Mrs. Vanessa Wynters. Somehow, he was sure Cissy failed to mention the "Mrs." part.

Neither he, nor his siblings, expected their aunt to stay away from Sherringham entirely. But then, hadn't he stayed away as well? Perhaps they were both fleeing, unable to bear the memories.

If anything, Sherringham clung to her memories, of that he was sure. Even last night, as he lay abed in his room for the first time in years, he could still hear Olivia's voice, haranguing him. Clairissa's too. Would he never cease to hear her screams?

Closing upon a sharp bend in the road, Adrian reined in the stallion.

Dismounting, he walked with the horse to the road's edge, halting at the place where Olivia's carriage had hurtled off the side, tumbling down the ravine and bursting into flames from the lamps and coal heaters.

He stood unmoving for a long moment, scanning the rocky landscape below. Then slowly, he reached into his coat and withdrew an ornate piece of jewelry from an inner pocket.

He contemplated it, rubbing his thumb over the baroque pearl that formed the body of the gem-studded dolphin brooch—Leonine Marrable's brooch, once presented to her by her kingly lover but lost two-and-a-half years ago when Olivia escaped into the night with her lady's maid, taking with her the Marrable jewels.

Adrian closed his fingers over the brooch. He'd returned to Sherringham to lay more than his aunt to rest, but also his last viscountess and the mysteries haunting her death. He wanted answers. Once and for all, he wanted to know exactly what happened that fatal night after he'd left Sherringham, and who now possessed the Marrable jewels.

Slipping the brooch back into his pocket, Adrian began to pace the ground, picturing the sequence of events in his mind's eye. At the time, Lawrence had been able to provide the most complete and reliable details. Not only had he been the first to arrive at the scene, but prior to that, he'd actually seen Olivia and her maid make their hurried departure.

Lawrence had been working in the study in the west tower at the time. It overlooked the stables and carriage house and owned a superior view of the grounds and surrounding countryside as well.

Voices drew him to the window that night where he observed two women rushing toward the outbuildings, baggage in hand. Both were easily identifiable—Olivia in her satins and velvet cloak and her maid, Bonnie Beckford. Soon they reappeared in a small carriage, Olivia driving and whipping the horse to a swift pace.

Lawrence continued to watch the dim light of their carriage lanterns as they moved along the road and passed out of Sherringham's gates. Being in the tower, he could still see the lights for a time. Just when he expected them to disappear altogether, at a point the family called the Devil's Hairpin, he saw the light seemingly bounce to the left, flaring bright, then tumbling down the embankment. Fearing the worst, Lawrence raced from the tower, secured a horse, and quickly rode out.

Brave Lawrence. He had scrambled down the hill somehow, to try and pull the women from the burning wreckage. The palm of his right hand bore a wicked scar for that effort. But his attempts proved hopeless from the start. He found Olivia's body engulfed in flames, burned beyond recognition. Later, only the ring she wore could identify her. Bonnie Beckford, however, was not to be found.

It was not until the following day that the jewels were discovered missing from Sherringham's vault. Only Olivia could have procured them. It was assumed the jewels had spilled out during the accident, or leastwise came to the maid's notice. Discovering the fabulous fortune, she evidently seized the moment and the jewels and fled.

Six months to the day after the tragedy, one of the pieces reappeared in an exclusive shop in Highbury. Twelve months after that, Countess Hazelden attended a charity ball wearing a pair of Leonine Marrable's earrings. She'd acquired them from a jeweler with an elite clientele in Brompton. It cost Adrian a significant sum to reclaim them.

Now, after another year's lapse, the dolphin brooch came into the possession of a jeweler on Kensington High Street. This time, the store owner supplied a detailed description of the seller, which proved as startling as it was beneficial. The woman, he recalled, possessed an abundance of flame-red hair, large golden-brown eyes, and stood to a height of, approximately, five feet, five inches. It wasn't Bonnie Beckford he described, but Olivia!

Cameron Kincaid, with whom Adrian had worked from the outset on the case, noted that the woman had likely worn a wig, and that Bonnie Beckford stood near in height to that of Lady Marrable. Though no one could remember the precise color of the maid's eyes, brown—even golden brown—was fairly common. That she'd chosen to pose as his late viscountess, Cameron deemed tasteless, if not sick-minded. Still, he found no reason to doubt the woman selling the brooch was, in fact, Bonnie Beckford.

But was it?

The question plagued Adrian no end, as did another matter—the ring that had identified the body as Olivia's. It was a simple cluster design, set with rubies, not one he'd personally given her, but one which she'd worn on numerous occasions. Yet, he couldn't recall her wearing the ring that night when they argued no more than two hours before her death. She had, however, been wearing her wedding band.

What became of it? Had Olivia removed it after their angry words and tossed it into her case along with the other jewels? That would explain why the band remained missing to this day.

But could there be another possibility? Could the body have been mistakenly identified? What if Bonnie Beckford now lay entombed in the family mausoleum, and Olivia yet lived, richly provided for by the Marrable jewels?

Adrian shook his head at the strain of his logic. It created more questions than it answered. Why, for instance, would the maid have been wearing Olivia's ring? It was improbable, though not impossible, that his wife had gifted it to her. If Olivia was anything, she was lavish in her generosity, much like Lawrence.

Lawrence. He must speak with his brother and sift through the details of his account once more. The servants too, those who'd remained in service since the time of the accident, would need to be re-questioned. Adrian vowed to have his answers and to trap the thief who was selling off the Marrable jewels.

Remounting his steed, he touched his heels to the stallion's flanks and turned back for Sherringham. Minutes later, he passed through the gates and headed for the sprawling manse which, in reality, was part castle, part manor house. When it appeared in sight, he thought it presented a rather forbidding aspect this day, the layers of centuries clinging to its stone, shrouding it with a melancholy air.

Arriving before the porticoed entrance, Adrian leaped down, tossing the reins to the stable boy who rushed forward to greet him. On entering the manse, he immediately encountered his butler, a short, spindly man of about sixty with thinning, white hair.

“Do you know the whereabouts of my brother, Timmons?” He handed him his hat and gloves.

“I believe he is with Mrs. Wynters, your lordship.”

“Indeed?” Adrian tried to mask his surprise, or was it irritation that he felt?

“Yes, your lordship. He offered to open the Photo House for Mrs. Wynters and help her transfer her photographic equipment there.”

“I see.” Adrian's brows pulled together as he imagined the nature of the help Lawrence might wish to offer her in Aunt Gwen's darkroom.

He loved his brother but was not blind to his shortcomings, in particular those regarding women. That Lawrence now closeted himself with the beautiful widow irked Adrian. Considerably.

“I sent James and Woodrow to assist in the task,” Timmons added. “And Master Geoffrey wished to lend a hand too.”

“Good! Then Mrs. Wynters has plenty of chaperons,” Adrian blurted without thinking, his mood instantly lifting.

“Your lordship?” Timmons canted his head.

Adrian felt his heat rise, realizing what he'd just said.

“*Assistants*. I meant to say, Mrs. Wynters has plenty of assistants to help her with her cameras and chemicals and the like.”

“Yes, your lordship. And happy they are to do so, I am sure,” Timmons replied perfectly straight-faced. “Assist her, that is.”

“Indeed.” The word came out a near growl. Adrian tried not to glare at the butler. “Thank you, Timmons. Tell my brother to join me as soon as he is able. I'll be in the west tower.”

Without looking back, he started to make his way through the enfilade of doors that stretched along the front of the house and led to the tower stairs on the far end. Changing his mind, he retraced his steps and climbed the grand staircase, heading for Olivia's former room.

Arriving there, Adrian paused at the cream-and-gilt double doors. On his instructions, the bedchamber had remained untouched since his wife's death, excepting for an occasional airing and dusting.

He eased opened the right door then stood on the threshold, unmoving, gazing into the darkened interior. The air assaulted him at once, stale and cloying. Even now, it carried a trace of roses, Olivia's favorite scent.

Though heavy curtains shut out most of the light, the open door allowed in enough to illuminate the furniture and trappings which glowed of pale embroidered satins, the room decorated in the French rococo mode. It was the only chamber of its kind in Sherringham. Olivia had claimed the style reflected her own nature, calling it “sensually erotic.”

He hated the room, her sanctuary, where once she'd made grand love to him, then later prohibited him. But not so others, as he had learned. Adrian stalked to the center of the room. He would order it searched, inch-by-inch, for the missing gold band. Then he'd have all the furnishings and trappings removed and burned.

As he passed his gaze over the chamber, he could feel Olivia's suffocating presence. It was near tangible. Somehow, he must rid himself of her, for she continued to linger in his veins like a contaminant, poisoning his every waking day.

The scent of roses suddenly filled his nostrils once more. Unable to bear it, he strode to the wall of curtains and yanked them back, then threw the center window wide. He inhaled deeply of the fresh air, imagining the room's memories, along with the odors, escaping their prison.

“Oh, hello,” a feminine voice called from below.

Adrian glanced down to the courtyard which the room overlooked. There stood Vanessa Wynters, holding a box and smiling up at him. As his eyes met hers, her smile widened. It was like a brilliant flash of sunshine beaming up at him, illumining the darkness that held him,

slipping past the chinks in his carefully maintained armor. His knees nearly buckled as he felt it reach into his heart.

“Hi, Uncle.” Geoffrey came into view, carrying a bundle, long in length and wrapped in cloth. “Mrs. Wynters said I can be her special assistant. She’s going to teach me all about photography.”

Adrian looked to Mrs. Wynters whose smile now shined on his eager-faced nephew. He found his voice but only after he’d cleared it twice.

“Then you must pay close attention and do precisely what she says.”

“Oh, yes, sir.” Geoffrey grinned.

At that moment, Lawrence appeared in the door of the Photo House, then stepped aside briefly to let James and Woodrow pass through and out. Seeing Adrian, Lawrence paused a moment, obviously noting the room in which he stood. He shuttered the surprise in his eyes, though it was not lost to Adrian.

“Timmons informs me you wish to see me.” Lawrence moved to the pretty widow’s side causing Adrian to frown.

“When you are finished. You’ll find me in the west tower study.”

Lawrence nodded, then relieved Mrs. Wynters of the box she carried and waited for her to precede him into the Photo House. Casting up a parting glance, Lawrence smiled.

“I’ll see you later, brother,” he called out as he disappeared into the house, Geoffrey trailing behind.

Adrian balled his hands as he stepped back from the window. It did not improve his mood when he discovered his heart thudding heavily. He could not explain the force of his emotions just now, or the sudden spike of jealousy he’d felt—still felt—knowing his brother basked in Vanessa Wynters’s sunny smile.

He clamped down on his feelings, shutting them off. He’d vowed two-and-a-half years ago to allow no other woman near his heart.

It disconcerted him that his emotions had near struck him prostrate. No, not *emotions*, he corrected the thought. Any attraction he felt for Vanessa Wynters was merely physical. After all, she was fair and shapely and could heat any man’s blood.

But he wanted no entanglements with that tender sex. None of a serious or lasting nature. Had he not endured two ghastly marriages? If he wasn’t cursed in matters of love then, certainly, he was a supremely poor judge of women. Clairissa and Olivia tormented him still.

No, he’d not risk his heart again. Better for him if he didn’t become involved. Better for her. Then too, what would Vanessa Wynters think of a man suspected of both his wives’ murders?

His eyes drew to the courtyard once more. Just then she reemerged from the Photo House, a vision of loveliness and light.

Adrian threw up a wall against his feelings. But in the next instant, a fierce anger welled up inside him afresh. He was a man shackled by his past, a past that refused to release him.

Again the scent of roses teased at his nostrils. It served only to heighten his ire. Images of Olivia flashed in his mind’s eye. It was she who bound him, more so than Clairissa. She’d promised that last night that he would never be free of her, that she’d ruined him for all others.

A sudden fury took hold of him. Crossing to the great bed, he set his hands to the silk hangings and began ripping them down.

“Witch! You have no power over me,” he shouted aloud. “I’ll not allow it.”

Trampling the silk underfoot, he swung his angry gaze over the room, then stood heaving for breath. Still, her suffocating presence surrounded him, the scent of roses intensifying.

It was only an illusion, a trick of mind, he told himself. The chamber, itself, with all its tangible reminders, preyed mercilessly on his mind.

But then the dark truth assailed him, as it had for months. He was far from free of his second viscountess.

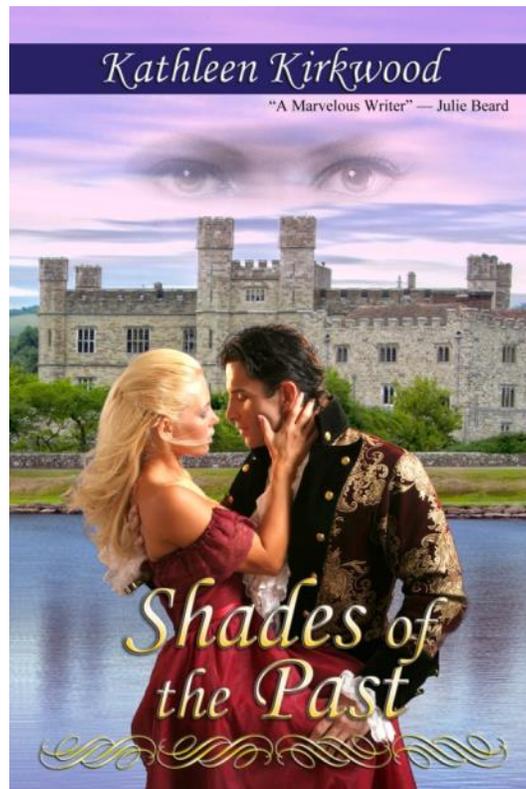
Mad with frustration, he fisted his hands and shouted out once more.

“Damn it, Olivia! Are you even dead?”

End of Sample

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Shades of the Past

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His Fair Lady

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His Fair Lady

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PART I

The Squire

“Dieu li volt!”

“God wills it!”

— Motto of the Crusaders

Chapter 1

Burgundy, June A.D. 1190

“The Lionheart awaits! We press on to Vézelay!” Sir Hugh FitzAlan bellowed his command and galloped back along the column of men, beasts, and wagons traveling the age-worn road.

Royce promptly followed on his sturdy roncín, shadowing the great knight as a squire’s duty demanded. Watchful, Royce held his steed at a precise distance behind the charger, determined to prove his worth for the honor so recently bestowed upon him.

Again came Sir Hugh’s full-throated cry as he heartened his troops and inspired them onward.

The Lionheart. Vézelay. The words burned in Royce’s chest and his pulse thumped in his veins.

Surely Heaven’s grace shined upon him. When Sir Hugh’s squire broke his leg a fortnight past during practice in the lists, ‘twas he — Royce de Warrene — whom the great knight singled out to replace the other noble. Soon after, Sir Hugh secured the funds he’d so fervently sought, enabling him to leave England apace with his retainers and join the king’s army amassing across the Channel in Burgundy, poised to embark on Crusade.

Beyond all hopes and imaginings, Royce now traveled in a train of gallant knights and stout men-at-arms, a red cross emblazoned upon his shoulder. Each amongst them was sworn to war against the infidel and to win back the Kingdom of Jerusalem for Christendom.

Failure was not possible, Royce deemed as he trailed closely behind Sr. Hugh. Did not the three most revered monarchs alive join forces and lead their armies east? Who could withstand them — England’s King Richard, *Coeur de Lion*, the very flower of chivalry itself; France’s illustrious Philip Augustus; and the renowned Holy Roman Emperor, Frederick Barbarossa?

Soon the devil, Saladin, and his Saracens would taste Crusader steel ten thousand times over. Justice would be exacted for their black deeds — the bloody seizure of Jerusalem and its Frankish king, the butchery of the captured Templars and Hospitallers, beheaded by the hundreds, and the enslavement of thousands of Christians.

Even now, the emperor, Frederick, and his host proceeded to the Holy Land whilst the armies of Richard and Philip gathered at Vézelay, their departure imminent.

Royce drew an invigorating breath, his heart drumming solidly against his chest. Surely Heaven’s grace did smile on him that he — a newly made squire of scarce ten-and five years — should accompany the valorous knight, Sir Hugh FitzAlan, on Holy Crusade to campaign beneath the banner of the Lionheart. One day, Royce vowed, he, too, would attain the spurs of knighthood and wield his sword and fight for right. Upon his honor, ‘twould be so.

The blustery shout of a roughened voice broke Royce’s ruminations, drawing his attention to a flush-faced man on a small bay mare. Royce recognized him as Beuvan de Luce, the oldest of the bachelor knights in Sir Hugh’s employ. At the knight’s boisterous call, Sir Hugh reined his charger to a halt, Royce doing likewise behind him.

“Do we march the night through?” Sir Beuvan asked, shoving back the coif of mail from his head, revealing grayed, sweat-dampened hair plastered to his skull like a cleric’s cap. “Vézelay yet lies three days hence.”

“Aye, Beuvan. We need close the time to two or we risk missing the king’s departure.” Sir Hugh lifted his bearded face to the dulling sky then returned his gaze to the knight.

“The moon shall be high and full this night and shall well light our way. We press on hard for now but take heart, friend. I have word, by Richard’s arrangement, a fleet awaits the troops at Marseilles to bear us across the sea to Acre. We shall take our rest once aboard ship and strengthen ourselves for the test to come.”

With that, Sir Hugh turned his charger toward the head of the column and rode swiftly forward. Royce kept pace on his roncín though his body ached with fresh complaints for the endless hours spent in the saddle these past days.

He ignored the shafts of pain splintering down his spine and through his legs, refusing them the least concern. Instead, his mind remained fixed on the knight’s words and the very core of his concerns.

‘Twas urgent they hasten, lest the Lionheart depart without them.

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The dusky veils of eve descended as the soldiery passed through the lush, rolling lands of Burgundy, their cloak of summer green darkening to black as the light faded completely. Hour upon hour, the retinue persevered along the ancient pilgrim road, the moon’s glow alone now silvering their path and brightening their way.

Royce welcomed the cool of night and gave himself to thoughts of the days to come — of sailing with the king and of what a Saracen might look like.

Beneath the solid tread of his roncín, the road dipped and rose and dipped again, following the countryside’s gentle contours. Lost to his thoughts, Royce scarce took note of those undulating rhythms until the road turned sharply upward, the climb steeper than any before. Glancing ahead, his gaze drew to the horizon as the entourage trod on and approached the crest of the road.

Royce blinked when a stain of color appeared beyond the top of the rise — an eerie ruddy gold, illumining the underbelly of the pitch-dark sky.

At the sight, Sir Hugh spurred his horse forward to gain a better view. Royce scarce won to his side, along with several retainers, when Sir Hugh threw up his gloved hand and signaled the troops to a halt. In unison, their gazes riveted on the scene below.

Royce’s stomach fisted tight as he spied a sizable village beyond, its patchwork of fields and crowd of thatched houses set ablaze, firing the midnight heavens. Faint cries drifted to their ears — piteous cries filled with horror, hysteria, and abject misery.

Sir Hugh vented a curse, his mien hardening as he turned in his saddle and addressed his companion knights and men-at-arms. “A foul deed hath been wrought this night,” he roared. “God’s test is upon us! Ready your blades and keep vigilant, men. We know not what cur we meet.”

With that he unsheathed his sword and commanded his men forward, leading them down into the vail. Instinctively, Royce set his heels to his roncín, keeping pace with the knightly host, unquestioning of whether he should do so or not. A squire did not join his lord in combat, true, but he need keep near to hand all the same.

Heart racing, he leaned into his mount. When the ground leveled out, he reached back for his spear, lashed on the roncín’s rump along with Sir Hugh’s spare weapons.

Royce’s blood ran hot in his veins. How often had he craved to rise to such a moment? Like all knightly candidates, he longed to hone his skills, gain the experience of battle, uphold the chivalric code. Freeing his spear — the only weapon allowed him as a squire — he gripped it tight, prepared to aid his lordly knight and do whatever the Almighty required of him.

Turning off the main road, the retinue hastened toward the village on a broad lane. Within minutes they galloped between burning fields where flames leapt high, devouring crops and vineyards and casting the soldiers in a molten glow of crimson and gold.

As the troops emerged from the fiery stretches, they reached the first sheds and houses on the outskirts of the village proper, aflame as was all else. Keen to danger, the knights sought signs of those responsible for the foul handiwork they now came upon — oxen split open from gullet to tail, the entrails spilt out, pigs and goats dissevered, their parts strewn across the ground.

Royce glanced at a lumpish mass nearby then realized 'twas a man lying face down in a pool of blood, his head smashed open. Several feet away lay a second man, his eyes staring vacantly to the heavens, his throat sliced wide, his arm cleaved from its joint.

Royce swallowed the bile that scaled his throat and fought down his revulsion. Looking to the seasoned soldiers surrounding him, he found them stone faced, their expressions shuttered as they continued to seek the perpetrators.

If the gruesome sight moved these warriors, they concealed their emotions entirely, so single-minded were they to their task. Embracing their example, Royce steeled himself and proceeded on.

At Sir Hugh's gesture, the troops slowed, moving more cautiously now along the principal lane, flanked by a blazing forest of peasant houses. Each dwelling stood apart on a small parcel, a network of paths running between them, the fires feeding upon their flimsy wattle-and-daub constructions. Fences lay shattered all about, the yards overrun and the livestock butchered, feathers everywhere.

Death met Royce at every glance — scores of villagers slain, lying in twisted heaps, male and female, young and old alike. 'Twas as though he'd entered Hell itself.

His stomach again threatening, Royce clamped down on his emotions, determined to not embarrass himself or his station. Diverting his gaze from the carnage, he scanned for the enemy host but found none. 'Twould seem they'd long departed, their devastation complete.

Moments later the lane ended, opening onto the heart of the village — the central green. To one end stood a substantial stone church and to the other, the manor house of the resident lord, it too of stone, encompassed by a wall and situated back toward the river. No doubt 'twas the Yonne that flowed there — the same river that accompanied the pilgrim road to Vézelay, coursing ever near.

Royce hardened his jaw as he surveyed the village green and the wreckage there. Bodies scattered its length, the peasants cut down as they'd fled for the protection of the sanctuary.

Of those who'd survived the attack, many now moved amongst the dead, wailing in utter despair. Others attempted to fight past the smoldering buildings lining the green, striving to reach neighbors who'd fallen beyond. Still more cowered in the doorway of the church, shock carved in their features and rooting them there.

Royce kept his roncin to a steady trot behind Sir Hugh as the troops filed onto the green. At the sight of the armed soldiery, the villagers began to shriek and disperse in every direction. But a handful halted, spying the red crosses that adorned the warriors' garments, and called the others back.

Recognizing the Crusader emblem, the villagers stayed their retreat. Relief shone on their stricken faces. With hands outstretched, tears of desperation spilling over their cheeks, they rushed to embrace their deliverers. Royce found himself quickly enveloped, as did the others in the retinue, as the peasants pleaded for help and sobbed out their doleful tale.

Sir Hugh sought to calm the crowd but to little effect. Just then a snowy-haired man, bent with age, grasped Sir Hugh's booted foot, thanking God for sending His chosen defenders, however late.

"Who hath plagued you this night, old father?" Sir Hugh demanded as the man continued to cling to his boot. "What foe besieged this place and wreaked such havoc?"

The old man looked up with haunted eyes and shook his head. "Could not tell, could not tell," he jabbered. "'Twas a surprise raid, a large company of soldiers. They wore no livery to identify them, only garments of black to shroud them in the night."

Sir Hugh's brow deepened. "Did you see who commanded them? Did you recognize any amongst them?"

"No, no. But the main force rode for the manor house." The man released his hold on the knight's boot and lifted a bony finger toward the structure. "'Twas as if they knew Lord Hamelin was in residence, returned these two days past to accept the rents."

Worry slashed the man's weathered features afresh, his voice quavering. "I fear what has befallen our lord and his family. The raiders purposed death to all here in Vaux. Of that I am certain."

Sir Hugh swore sharply then barked orders directing a portion of the troops to attend to the survivors and learn what they could of the attack. Motioning for the others to follow, he rode toward the manor house. Without hesitation, Royce followed and within minutes passed through the manor's stone enclosure wall and into the courtyard.

Royce sucked his breath at the sight of the ground, thick with slaughter. What killing fury had visited this place? he wondered as he drank in the horror spread there. What dark enemy had this Lord of Vaux?

His gut twisting, Royce guided his mount behind Sir Hugh as they picked a path through the bloody tangle of corpses, everywhere spines broken, limbs severed, heads gashed and lolling. Again his stomach lurched, on the brink of revolt, but he clenched his jaw tight and pressed on.

Arriving before the steps of the manor, Royce dismounted on uneasy legs, his knees gone soft as curd. Grim reality awaited once more — a half-dozen guards sprawled lifeless upon the stairs, having made their final defense here. Their obvious failure did not bode well for those within.

Working his way around the fallen men, Royce climbed the steps behind Sir Hugh, dreading that the manor now served as a tomb. At the top, the massive entrance door stood ajar, all dark within.

First to gain the landing, Sir Hugh seized a torch from one of the iron brackets that flanked the entry. His sword in hand, flashing with firelight, he bid his men forward and entered. Instantly, the soldiers surged after him, jarring Royce aside where he'd hesitated before the portal. Swallowing deeply, Royce tightened his hold on his spear and forced himself across the threshold.

Smoke stung his eyes and a stench assaulted his nostrils as he stepped into the hall. Covering his lower face with his hand, Royce squinted through the haze and sought Sir Hugh and the other knights. As before, no foe met their steel. Only the dead remained.

Glancing to the hearth, he located the source of the smoke and loathsome odor. There, several of the lord's great hounds had been cut open and tossed upon the fire.

Revolted, Royce backed away, his steps faltering as he moved toward Sir Hugh. Turning his attention to the heart of the hall, he guessed the nobles had been enjoying late-evening

entertainments when the attack occurred. Tables, which had yet to be dismantled for the night, now lay overturned, a gaming board and playing pieces scattered in the rushes.

On the floor nearby stretched the body of a woman, gowned in ivory silk, a ruined lute beside her. Her filmy veil twisted about her, torn and disheveled, exposing gold-spun hair, matted with blood at her temple. Surrounding her lay four — nay, five — men in blue-and-silver livery. A personal guard perhaps?

Royce compressed his lips, finding it odd that their attire differed so markedly from those of the defenders who lay without. Mayhap she was the lord's wife, he reasoned, though among the slain he spied another woman crumpled in the rushes across the room, her garments no less fine.

Royce continued toward Sir Hugh then halted as his foot connected with something substantial, immovable. Dropping his gaze, he discovered a large bulk of a man in velvet robes edged with fur. Royce gaped at the hole in the man's chest, a bloody pulp. 'Twas the lord of Vaux, stabbed countless times, his eyes put out.

Royce staggered back a pace, a cold sweat breaking across his forehead and coating the palms of his hands. Spots sprang to life, mottling his vision, while the room began to move beneath his booted feet. Dimly, he heard one of the soldiers call to Sir Hugh from across the room.

"They are all dead above stairs, sire — the children, servants, everyone."

"Craven whoresons be they who did this!" Sir Hugh swore in a burst of temper. "God's teeth! Would that we had time to give pursuit."

Swearing fiercely once more, he pivoted in place and started forward. Abruptly, he halted in his footsteps as his gaze alighted on Royce.

Surprise fired the knight's eyes. Or was it confusion? Royce could not read his shifting expression. Perhaps he'd mistakenly expected to find his former squire and didn't readily identify him. But as Sir Hugh's brows collided over his nose, his eyes darkening with displeasure, panic unfurled through Royce, head to toe.

Should he not have accompanied the knights after all? Skimming a glance about the chamber, Royce realized with a start that no other squires stood present within save himself alone. Heat swarmed into his cheeks. Though he stood to the height of most knights' shoulders, Royce felt he'd just shrunk to the size of a gnat.

His heart thudded heavily as Sir Hugh turned brusquely aside and signaled to the man nearest him. In an instant, Beuvan appeared in the corner of Royce's spotty vision.

"Take de Warrene and search outside," Sir Hugh growled in a voice not to be challenged.

Royce opened his mouth to speak, shaken that the knight he served should order him from his side. Had he erred so greatly? Did Sir Hugh think to dismiss him altogether for this lapse?

"Now!" the knight snapped, then gave Royce his back and moved off.

Beuvan moved to stand before Royce, studying him closely. A moment later he expelled a breath and turned on his heel. "This way, lad. Have a care where you step."

Stinging with embarrassment, his stomach yet roiling beneath his belt, Royce followed Beuvan to the back of the hall where the service rooms lay. They passed along a narrow passage between the buttery and pantry and came to a short flight of steps leading down to a small chamber.

Here an oaken tub stood, half-filled with water, much of its contents sloshed over the stone floor. Woodenly, Royce observed that someone had recently bathed here. A slab of soap melted in one of the many puddles pooling the floor. Like life itself in this place, the water had gone cold.

Proceeding outside and into the yard, Royce drew deep of the fresh air, clearing his lungs. Unfortunately, it did naught to soothe his touchy stomach.

“By the saints!” Beuvan spat suddenly.

Royce traced his gaze to the sheep fold where the animals had met the same fate as all the other livestock in Vaux, here the entire flock destroyed.

“‘Twould seem someone wished to annihilate the very village itself, eh, lad?” Not waiting for a response, Beuvan looked toward the river and gestured to the mill complex situated beyond a stand of trees. “Come, lad. Best we inspect that too. No telling what it might yield. Keep alert. I doubt the raiders left it untouched.”

With his spear firmly in hand, Royce followed Beuvan, challenged to keep pace with him. Though he felt drained and unsteady, he was thankful to distance himself from the manor and the devastation that surrounded it.

Passing the stand of trees, they continued toward the complex that appeared to be two separate mills of differing sizes with an adjoining house, all backed to the river. As they approached the buildings, they spied several lumpish forms in the grass, illuminated by the moon’s glow.

Beuvan sprinted forward and closed on the shapes. Royce joined him moments later, panting for breath. Instantly, he froze as his gaze lodged on what remained of the miller, his wife, and two daughters, all mercilessly cut down, the man’s brains spilled out.

Royce’s fragile hold over himself broke completely and his stomach convulsed. Dashing for the river’s edge, he scarce gained the bank when he dropped to his knees and began to heave. A blackness swept through him and again he retched. At last his stomach emptied and his sight began to clear.

Shame flooded him. He was a weakling, an *enfant*, not fit to serve as squire to any knight. He wanted to crawl into the nearest hole.

“First time is it, lad?” Beuvan moved to stand behind him. “You’ve yet to see battle, have you? This is your first taste of such bloodletting, then?”

Royce nodded, humiliated.

“You’ll toughen up,” the older man assured with gruff confidence. “There will be far worse to see in Jerusalem.”

Royce hung his head. How would he endure it? How could he serve Sir Hugh? All his high dreams and aspirations for himself and the future crumbled in his mind’s eye. What a worthless candidate he was for knighthood. How could he hope to uphold the Code of Chivalry if he be ever on his knees, unable to cope with the sight of death?

“Will you tell Sir Hugh?” Royce rasped out.

“Tell him what?” Surprise tinged Beuvan’s voice.

Miserable, Royce swiped a hand across his mouth and looked up to the knight. “That he’s made a sorry choice for a squire. I’ve shamed myself, and therefore shamed him. How can I attend Sir Hugh at the field of battle if I cannot control my stomach here?” He dropped his head again, wholly dispirited. “Surely he’ll wish to leave me behind and choose another.”

For a moment Beuvan did not speak. Then he squatted beside Royce and cocked his head to one side. “Here now, lad. Do you not know why Sir Hugh sent you from the hall just now? ‘Twas apurpose.”

Royce lifted his eyes to Beuvan. “Apurpose?”

“Aye, to save face — *your* face before the other knights. I’ve no need to tell him what he already knows. He could read the sum of it in your ashen face.”

Royce looked away, his disgrace biting deep to his soul.

“Ah, lad, all the brotherhood have stood — or knelt — where you do now, spewing out their insides. Knights are not born, young Royce, they are made. None ever becomes fully immune to the grim realities of our profession. But they do harden. So shall you. No one goes to war but he does not come back changed. No lad can go on Crusade and not help but come back a man.”

Beuvan gave a reassuring clout to Royce’s back and rose. “For now, wash your face and take a moment to steady yourself. I’ll search further along the bank.”

Beuvan started off then turned back to Royce. “Sir Hugh has no intention of dismissing you, rest assured. I will tell you this — you are skilled, lad. You have passion and heart, though not in greater measure than a dozen others.”

“Then why did he choose me for his squire?” Royce asked, perplexed.

“Because he saw something in you — a bit of himself I believe. You’re sharp and clear minded, to be sure, but also self-reliant, independent in your thinking. Those qualities will serve you well, lad, though they may also lead you into a few mishaps, as they did this night.”

Beuvan’s lips spread in a smile. “Now see to yourself. I’ll look about.”

Royce moved to the river’s edge and splashed his face with water then sleeved himself dry. Catching up his spear from where he’d dropped it, he stood to his feet.

As he cast a glance down the river, he saw Beuvan bending over another form in the grass. Royce looked away, unable to bear more. Not this night. Spying two small boats overturned on the bank nearby, he strode tiredly toward them, thinking to sit awhile.

Was Beuvan right? Would he harden with time? What if he handled himself no better in time to come — in view of the Crusader knights, or, worse, the Lionheart himself?

His spirits plummeted once more, failure looming as a very clear possibility. If he could not stomach the discoveries of this night, how could he withstand the bloodshed to come, warring against the infidels?

Downcast, Royce halted before the boats. Despite his years of training, he’d failed before he’d begun. Be he a squire or knight, it mattered not if he couldn’t rise to the demands of his calling. What good was he to anyone? He castigated himself, plopping down heavily on the craft nearest him.

Instantly, a squeal issued from beneath the boat, followed by a thud. Royce sprang to his feet, his senses sharpening. He held his spear aimed at the boat. When all remained silent, he gave a solid kick to the craft’s side.

Again came a high-pitched squeal, followed by several knocks and thuds against the underside of the boat, something shifting about there. By the high pitch of the squeal he held certain ‘twas no man hidden beneath. Some animal then? Surely not a dog. The cry did not suit that of a cat either. A kitten, perchance? Or piglet?

Cautiously, Royce set his spear aside, then moving swiftly, he gripped the side of the boat by its edge and hoisted it up, flipping it back and over. Another squeal filled the air as Royce’s gaze locked with two huge eyes set in an elfin face.

‘Twas a child, a young girl of no more than seven or eight years. She was hunched in a ball, wrapped in homespun toweling. A halo of silvery hair spilled about her, pale as the moon.

“By all the saints—” Royce muttered his astonishment.

In the darkness and death that gripped this place, she shined like the brightest little star plucked from heaven, an angelic waif, who’d somehow survived the night.

The child continued to stare at him, trembling fiercely as she clutched the thin toweling about her. Taking in her bare shoulders and limbs, Royce realized she was naked beneath the cloth. Had she been snatched from her pallet whilst she slept and deposited here, he wondered?

Unfastening his cloak, he draped it about her, then lifted her from the ground, up into his arms. At once, she began to squeal and wriggle, panicked as though she feared he'd harm her. With little effort, Royce held her against his chest. She weighed no more than a feather.

"Shhh, now, little one. I'll not hurt you," he soothed.

She continued to writhe and nearly slipped from his arms, but suddenly she went still, her gaze fastening on his shoulder. Her little fingers lifted to the red cross, caressing it as if she recognized its significance. In the next breath, she wrapped her arms about his torso and clung to him with surprising strength.

Royce fell back a pace, his breath leaving him. "Ho there, sweeting! Ah, could you . . . ease your hold, just a little? . . . No, I guess not. Er, let's sit over here." Royce moved toward the second of the overturned boats. "That's right, easy. Nothing to fear, I'll protect you."

Circling his arms about the child, he lowered them both to the boat, shifting her onto his lap. As he did, she looked over to where the miller's family lay in the grass. Shuddering against Royce, she buried her face in his chest.

"Are they your people, little one?"

She said nothing but burrowed deeper into him, continuing to grip him tightly.

Royce let the moment pass, content to provide her the haven of his arms. Poor girl. What horrors she must have witnessed from her place beneath the boat, her family slain before her eyes. Minutes more passed then, finally, he leaned back and gazed on her features, so delicately modeled. A small, captivating mole marked the corner of her upper left lip.

"Do you have a name, little one?" he coaxed softly. When she didn't respond, he pressed again for a name to put to her. Still she would not speak. He smiled gently. "What shall I call you then? Mary? Margaret? Joan?"

The girl lifted her face to his, her brows crimping together as though she searched her mind and could not quite find the answer she sought. At last, her little lips parted. "Ana," she whispered petal soft.

Royce's smile widened. "Ana, is it? 'Tis a lovely name and suits you well, child."

He continued to smile but was unable to win the same from her. Instead, she lay her head against his heart and rested there as if listening to its calming beat. Moments later she sighed, her little slip of a body conforming to his, the tension passing out of her. Royce stroked her bright hair, finding himself touched by her trust and innocence, savoring his sudden role as protector.

"What have you there?" Beuvan's rough voice broke the spell of the moment as he returned. "Why, she's a little mite is she not?"

Ana's hold tightened on Royce as the knight reached out to touch her.

Beuvan chuckled. "A bit shy, is she?"

"I believe she's the miller's daughter — an orphan now." Royce continued to stroke Ana's hair, calming her. "Did you find anything along the river?"

"A woman, looked to be a servant of some manner." Beuvan scratched his whiskery cheek then vented a wearied breath. "Best bring the girl along. We need get back. Surely someone will take her off your hands."

Royce rose and trod behind Beuvan, feeling suddenly reluctant to relinquish the child. No matter. Ana remained twined fast about him.

In minutes they rejoined the others, finding they'd quit the manor and moved to the village green.

"This has all the markings of a *chevauchee*," Sir Hugh was saying to a handful of his closest knights. "With France's king departing on Crusade, no doubt there will be many more such raids amongst the local lords. Rivalries run bitter and deep in these parts I am told."

Seeing Beuvan's approach, Sir Hugh acknowledged him with a nod, then swept a glance to Royce and the child. He returned his attention to the circle of knights.

"Spread word we are moving out. We will escort the survivors to the next village, a place called Vincelles. Some of Vaux's men have agreed to stay behind to bury the dead. The people of Vincelles can send others back to aid them. We can do no more. Precious time is lost to us already."

As the troops and villagers prepared to depart, Royce moved among them, seeking to find someone who might know the miller's child and agree to take her. But the people gave him little heed, seeing only to themselves and their own, their emotions and senses still ravaged by the terrors of this night.

Unable to tarry longer, Royce moved to his roncín. "You'll ride with me, sprite," he informed Ana, trying to pry her arms from beneath his arms and about his middle. She clung all the tighter. "Come now, up you go. I'll mount right behind you, I promise." She continued to squeeze him, unwilling to separate from him one inch.

Chuckles sounded around him, the knights finding amusement in his plight. Royce made a swift decision, placed his foot in the stirrup, and, with Ana firmly attached, pulled himself upward and into the saddle with all the grace of a pregnant cow. As he settled them together in the saddle, Ana melted into him, a contented smile tilting the corners of her little mouth.

Laughter broke out among the knights.

"'Twould seem Royce has won a heart this night," Renaus FitzOsbern declared in a booming voice for all to hear.

"Such devotion, gained in so little time. What's the lad's secret?" Roger de Bray's tone glowed with admiration.

"Fathers best lock away their wives and daughters when young Royce grows into his manhood," Henry le Toit warned, then burst with laughter, the others joining him.

Royce leveled them a cross look, then clicking his tongue, guided his roncín to his accustomed position behind Sir Hugh.

At that, Sir Hugh ordered the men and villagers to move out. Leaving behind the smoldering village, they rejoined the pilgrim road.

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Dawn split the skies as the train of soldiers and peasants arrived in Vincelles.

Ana awoke from her slumber, snuggled against Royce's chest and warmed by his cloak. As she shifted against him, he dropped his gaze to her. His breath caught as his eyes met hers — two glorious emeralds shining up at him. In the dark, he'd been unable to discern their color. Now, with the morning's light, he found himself entranced by their exquisite shade of green.

The blare of a horn snapped his attention to the front of the line where Sir Hugh's herald sounded their presence to the inhabitants, signaling their peaceful intentions.

In short time, the village elders met with them at the edge of their boundary and Sir Hugh advised them of the attack on Vaux. Generously, the people of Vincelles welcomed those of their sister village, agreeing to give them shelter.

"Lad, come quick," Beuvan called from where he'd been mingling among the peasantry.

Royce dismounted, and with Ana still securely attached in his arms, he strode to Beuvan's side. The knight grinned wide and turned to a couple who appeared to be of middling years.

"Lad, this is Georges, the village brewer, and his wife, Marie. They wish to see the girl."

The woman came forward, clasping her hands before her as she consumed Ana with her gaze. "Oh, Georges, the Lord has heard our prayers," she exclaimed softly.

The brewer blinked back the wetness that appeared in his eyes. "*Vraiment*, and He has answered them as well." He pulled his eyes from the child and looked to Royce and Beuvan. "Marie and I, we have no *enfants* to fill our home. We will take the girl and raise her as our own."

The couple moved to relieve Royce of Ana, but she clung to him as ever she had throughout the night.

"Sweeting, you cannot come with me where I am going," he explained.

It took the four of them to disentangle the girl from Royce and give her over to Marie's arms.

"Her name is Ana," Royce explained to the couple, avoiding the heart-wringing look in the girl's emerald eyes. "Her parents and sisters were murdered before her eyes. She isn't inclined to speak much."

Tears now streamed over Ana's pale cheeks. Why did he feel like such a blackguard for leaving her here? He fumbled for the leather coin bag tucked inside his belt and gave it over to Georges.

"Here, use this to feed and clothe her. She has nothing in this world, not even a simple gown." By the shabbiness of their garments, Royce noted the brewer and his wife obviously had little of their own as well. Still, compassionately, they would take in this child.

"*Merci*, young man." Marie smiled, her face full of gratitude. "Your kindness will not be forgotten."

As the couple turned to leave with Ana, she screamed for Royce, thrashing in Marie's hold and reaching out her arms to him. Her anguish tore at his heart. Something broke deep inside him at that moment — broke for this child, for all she'd endured, for all she yet faced in time to come among strangers, having lost everything.

Royce balled his hands at his sides. By all that was holy, if there be a reason to master himself and embrace his calling, then here it be before him. Upon his honor, he would earn his spurs and uphold the knightly code, protecting the weak and the powerless. For all the little Anas in the world, he would fulfill his destiny and become the man he must.

Remembering the cross about his neck, he drew its chain from beneath his tunic and over his head. Quickly, he moved to Ana.

"Shhh sweeting," he soothed. Gifting her with his cross, he placed it around her neck, then thumbed the tears from her cheeks. "God will protect you, little one, and keep you safe. Remember me in your prayers, sweet Ana, that I can be strong and do all required of me."

Impulsively, Royce pressed a kiss to Ana's forehead. Turning on his heel, he strode quickly away and mounted his *roncin* behind Sir Hugh.

With a final glance back to Ana's angelic face, he rode out with Sir Hugh and the other soldiers and pressed on for Vézelay.

PART II

The Knight and the Maiden

“Now is the time at hand,
Love come to blossom,
Ripens the little maid,
Swells now the tender breast,
Vainly hath all been done
If all is ended.”

—Late twelfth—early thirteenth
century, Anonymous

Chapter 2

The Palace of Westminster, England Autumn A.D. 1200

“Look there, cousin. ‘Tis the great Crusader knight, Sir Royce de Warrene,” a feminine voice murmured, awe drenching her voice.

“Are you sure ‘tis he, the hero of Acre and Ascalon?” a second female’s voice asked, her interest obvious by her tone.

“I had it from Lady Margaret, who had it from Lord Bromley, that Sir Royce landed at Dover this week past, returned from the Holy Lands. He sent word ahead of his coming and was to arrive here at court any day,” the first confided, breathless with excitement. “Besides, the knight is the only man in the chamber I cannot put a name to. And mind you his tanned features and the sun-brightened streaks in his hair and beard. Surely ‘tis he.”

“Mmmm, I’m inclined to agree,” the second voice purred, as if relishing some treat. “By his size and bearing alone, ‘tis evident he is a warrior of some import. *Certes*, he towers above all the other nobles present here. I venture he possesses more brawn than ten of them together. One would need such strength to slay the infidels by the hundreds, single-handed.”

“Hundreds? Oh nay, cousin, by the *thousands*, ‘tis told.” A sigh issued from the first female. “He’s very handsome, is he not? And look at the length of his sword and scabbard. You know what ‘tis said about a knight’s sword?” Her voice dropped a fraction, conspiratorially. “The armorer makes each sword specifically in proportion to its owner’s size.”

“How deliciously intriguing,” the second voice purred once more. “I would very much enjoy examining the size of yon knight’s *blade* for myself — fully unsheathed, of course.”

A tinkle of mischievous feminine laughter sprinkled the air.

“Has he a wife?” the second pressed.

“Shhh! He’ll hear.”

Royce turned at the approach of the Yeoman of the Chamber, a wiry man with hawklike features carrying an ornate staff.

“His Majesty will see you now.” The man gave a shallow dip of his shoulders in semblance of a bow and bid the knight follow.

Casting a swift glance toward the two ladies who’d been so avidly discussing him, Royce acknowledged them with a nod and appreciative smile. Their cheeks flamed instantly.

Royce’s smile widened as he turned, taking in their shocked realization that he’d overheard all they’d spoken. In truth, their comments were heady wine for a man just returned to his homeland after baking these ten years past in the desert. Then, too, the court ladies in their bright gowns and finery were as sweet as honey to his eyes.

Royce continued behind the official, making his way through the forechamber and crush of lords, ladies, and clerics, proceeding toward an immense oaken door at the far end of the chamber.

The official halted there to exchange brief words with the guards. Eying the knight, they required he divest himself of his weapons before proceeding further. Royce complied, though he felt naked without his sword and the small dagger he kept sheathed on the back of his belt. Satisfied, the guards moved aside, allowing the two forward. With decided ceremony, the yeoman struck the door thrice with his staff. Moments later, the door drew open from within and Royce found himself face to face with a moon-faced clerk.

“De Warrene? Enter, enter.” The clerk waved him in with a rapid flapping of his hand.

Royce crossed the portal as the clerk scurried off across the chamber, stopping where a flock of nobles and ministers attended a richly garbed man of abbreviated height. The clerk wormed his way through the congestion then dropped to his knee and waited to be recognized.

Royce fixed his gaze on the man at the center of everyone’s interest. He stood at a thick-planked table, silhouetted against a glazed window that soared upward into a graceful arch. Methodically, the man affixed his signet ring to wax and parchment, approving document after document proffered by the royal administrators. He completed the task, then waved them away and stepped apart of the table, extending his arms. Instantly, a servant bustled forward and aided him into a luxurious fur-lined robe. The servant, presumably his tailor, quickly sank to the floor and began fussing with a noticeable sag in the hem.

Royce absorbed the sight of John Plantagenet, consecrated King of England since May of the year past. He was sturdily built though surprisingly short for a Plantagenet, having none of King Richard’s height. He did possess the reddish Angevin hair of his father and brothers, however, and if rumor had it right, their quick temper. Even as he waited for his tailor to right the wayward hem, John paced this way and that, displaying a hot, restless energy so characteristic of the Angevins and their diabolical energy.

Royce continued to wait, regretting he’d not returned from the Holy Lands sooner to aid the Lionheart. Perhaps, had he been at the siege of Châlus to serve the king, he might have prevented

...

Royce shut off the thought, knowing his presence would have made not one dram of difference. Richard had been impulsive, foolhardy, riding up to the castle wall to inspect the progress of his siege machines, courting danger, not even taking the precaution of donning his armor. A cross-bowman upon the upper ramparts handily discharged a bolt into his shoulder. Richard died ten days later, his wound turned gangrenous.

Royce refocused on the new sovereign. John now wore the crown, having wrested it from his young nephew, sired by old Henry’s third son, Geoffrey — now also deceased. England’s greatest barons, including William Marshal himself, refused to support the boy, who was much spoiled and dominated by unprincipled counselors. They feared his yoke would prove far worse than John’s.

Were they right to support John, the youngest and only surviving eaglet of Henry II? Royce had questioned their wisdom all the way from the shores of Jaffa to those of Dover. He did not trust John. Few did.

As Royce beheld the restless man before him, he wondered what to think of the new king. Old Henry and his brood were not called “the demoniac Angevins” for naught.

After pressing his ring to yet another glob of wax and parchment, the king snatched up his goblet and turned, nearly trampling the moon-face clerk who still waited on bended knee. After taking notice of the clerk and then heed of his words, John jerked round, swinging his gaze across the chamber to Royce. His face brightened.

“Ah, Sir Royce de Warrene!” he exclaimed buoyantly. “I’ve looked forward to your arrival since news of your landing at Dover.”

“Majesty.” Royce bowed deeply, touching a knee to the floor at the king’s approach, noting how the tailor scrambled after him, still connected by needle and thread to the royal hem.

Oblivious, the king came to a halt before him, continuing to smile. Meanwhile, the tailor knelt at his side, his needle flying.

“Rise, Sir Royce,” John bid heartily. “I am anxious to hear of your adventures. No doubt word of your return has spread throughout all of England by now. The clerics at Dover are like gabbling old women, scratching down every morsel of news that comes to their ears and relaying the latest buzz to Canterbury and beyond.”

“The temptation is understandable, Majesty, what with the traffic of pilgrims and travelers that pass through Dover’s port.” Royce pressed to his feet.

Truth be told, he’d indulged in several hours’ gossip himself over cups of ale with the chroniclers, gleaning what he could of the status of the realm since Richard’s death,

“Yes, yes, understandable, but while the scribes report of your return, ‘tis the court that shall be the first to hear of the latest deeds of chivalry wrought by her knights for all of Christendom.”

John paused of a sudden, studying Royce closely as if seeking to take his measure. One side of his lips lurched upward into a crooked smile. Just as quickly, he whirled round and gestured to the moon-faced clerk.

“Wine! Wine for Sir Royce!” Impatiently, John crossed the space to meet the clerk halfway. The tailor gasped and scuttled after the sovereign once more, snatching at the needle dangling from the royal hem.

Seizing the goblet from the clerk’s pudgy hands, the king turned on his heels and strode back to Royce, thrusting the vessel into the knight’s hands. In the same moment, the tailor shrieked, having stabbed himself with the needle. He shoved his finger into his mouth and caught up his needle with his other hand, then bent to the hem once more.

“What’s this?” The king glanced down and pinned the tailor with an irritable look. “Ralph, are you yet to be done?”

“I will be if your Majesty will do me the kindness of standing still,” he replied waspishly.

John grinned like a mischievous child who’d vexed the man apurpose and now gained precisely what he desired. “So be it, so be it,” he allowed and strove to stand motionless while Ralph took his stitches, though the king’s efforts proved less than successful.

John angled a glance to Royce. “Stories of your prowess burgeon your name, Sir Royce. I vow they rival the deeds of my late brother.”

Again, Royce sensed John searched him out. Certainly, Royce had distinguished himself in the East, but he stood nowhere near the stature of Richard, only in his shadow, as did most men.

“Sire, you know how the people love to exaggerate.” The image of the women in the forechamber sprang to mind.

“You fought with Richard at the Battle of Acre, did you not? Knighted on the field of battle, I am told.”

Royce caught a combative note in John’s voice, containing a sudden sharpness and swift change of mood. Had he misspoken somehow, Royce wondered?

“Aye, sire. The stories are true.”

John downed a mouthful of wine then touched his forefinger to his lips. “Let me see if I have the right of it. Sir Hugh FitzAlan’s destrier was killed beneath him, the beast falling atop the knight and trapping his legs.”

“Aye, Majesty.”

“But then you, his high-hearted squire, ran onto the field of battle, snatched up his sword, and wielded it with all the ferocity of a Norse berserker, slaying three hundred infidels on the spot and sparing your knight.”

Royce’s lips twitched upward. “The number has a tendency to grow in people’s telling, Majesty, but essentially the tale is true. I fought on till the Saracens either lay dead about us or

withdrew at the sound of retreat. By God's grace, Sir Hugh lived to fight other battles." Seven more before he fell a final time.

"And my brother knighted you on the field of battle, did he?"

"'Twas Sir Hugh who gave me the *colée*, once we'd freed him from beneath his horse. 'Twas his privilege, though the king looked on."

Royce remembered the proud moment, the knights Beuvan and Renaus supporting Sir Hugh while he delivered the ceremonial blow to his cheek, Roger de Bray and Henry le Toit looking on. Now they all lay in the dust of Jerusalem, save Beuvan who yet lived and chose to remain in Haifa.

The tailor completed his task and bit off the thread with his teeth. Full of thought, the king strode back to the table, flipped open the lid of a jeweled casket, then began slipping costly rings onto his fingers and settling a great chain and medallion of gold about his neck.

He turned back, his expression shuttered. "Such gallantry and skill as yours are invaluable to the realm. I understand you even campaigned with the Templars."

"For a time, Majesty."

"Yet you chose not to join their order? Curious." John's eyes lodged on him, narrowed, crafty.

Royce cast about in his mind for a tactful response. While he'd once considered joining the order, he'd decided against it due to a taint of fanaticism that infected those hardened warriors. He did embrace much of their strict discipline, however.

"For most of my stay in the kingdom of Jerusalem, I employed my sword securing the road between Acre and Ascalon and defending Jaffa. But 'twas always my intent to return to England's shores."

Reaching beneath his tunic, Royce produced a small scroll, feeling now to be the best time to broach the reason for his requested audience.

"Before your brother, King Richard, departed the Holy Lands — for services I rendered beneath his banner, particularly those during the bitter retaking of Ascalon — he granted me a portion of land to claim at the time of my return. Knowing I desired to remain a while longer in the East, he assured a seneschal would be appointed to oversee the estate in my absence. Now, at long last, I am returned to assert my claim in person."

Royce gave over the scroll to the king then released a long breath, feeling a mixture of joy and edgy uncertainty collide in his chest as he embraced his future, no longer a landless knight.

Richard had assured the land boasted a fine castle and prosperous village. In addition, Royce had accrued a modest fortune while in the East. The years ahead boded well. Once he'd secured his new land, seen to the castle and its defenses, he would consider establishing his own house, his own bloodline. For that he need seek a good marriage, preferably one with an important heiress who could increase his station, bringing him more titles and more lands. Royce was determined to secure a place of import and influence for himself in England now that he'd returned.

The king's brows drew upward, surprise lighting his eyes as he scanned the parchment bearing his brother's seal. "In truth, I was unaware of this particular grant, Sir Royce, or of this estate being named among the royal holdings."

Royce's breath stilled in his lungs. He felt as though a great fist had just reached out and squeezed his heart. What intent lay behind the king's words? Did he think to deny him the Lionheart's behest and keep the estate for himself? Royce's doubts about John reared their scaly heads.

The king continued to peruse the document then, with head bent, he cut his eyes up at Royce.

“I confess, I am surprised Richard had royal lands left to give, or that he would grant them without a price. He would have sold London itself had he been able, so that he might finance his wars. The kingdom never finds rest,” he murmured, returning his gaze to the parchment. “Always a wolf at the door.”

John straightened abruptly, rolling the document with quick fingers. “Of course, I shall support Richard’s wishes. Like my brother, I recognize you to be a worthy and *loyal* subject of the realm?” His words held a question in their tone.

“That I am, sire,” Royce returned, meeting the king’s penetrating gaze.

“Then certainly you are deserving of such reward,” John said simply. He became all movement again. Returning to the table, he motioned his counselors and attendants to leave him and seized upon an iron-bound casket.

“I shall have my counselors examine the grant and determine precisely where the property lies.” He fitted a key to the casket’s domed lid and opened it. “There is still much to learn of my domains. ‘Tis my intention to rule personally, but thus far I’ve completed a tour only of my Continental holdings. In the weeks to come, I shall begin a circuit throughout England. Who knows? Perhaps, I shall chance across your new lands.”

John tossed Royce a smile, then dropped the scroll in the casket and secured its lid with a click of the key. “Rest assured, I shall have the matter examined forthwith as you’ll wish to settle and make preparations before winter.”

“My gratitude, Majesty.” Royce bowed deeply once more, discomfited that the king retained his only proof of Richard’s grant, a document he’d painstakingly guarded through the years. Before he could rise, the blare of trumpets sounded loudly from without.

“Ah, the feasting is to begin anew.” The king smiled wide. “We are yet celebrating my new bride’s coronation, Sir Royce. You will join us, of course, as our honored guest. Isabella will delight in your tales of gallantry and valor, as will all the court.”

Royce pulled his gaze from the casket, feeling a twinge of distrust in his gut. There was naught he could do at the moment about the scroll.

“You are most gracious, Majesty.”

Again the trumpets sounded.

“The queen awaits!” John snatched up his crown from where it rested haphazardly on a nearby chair and lodged it onto his head.

Bidding Royce follow, he hastened from the chamber, taking long strides on short legs, his robes flowing and jewels sparkling, a smile splitting his bearded face. Obviously, this youngest of the Plantagenet brood enjoyed all the advantages and attentions of kingship, a station that for many years must have seemed beyond his reach.

Royce trailed after the king, matching his brisk pace. Surprisingly, the courtiers and attendants who’d held audience with the sovereign stepped aside for Royce before they themselves joined the royal progression. He could only wonder at their seeming deference. Presumably, many a man enjoyed stations far greater than he. Perhaps ‘twas the favor the king afforded him that now governed their actions, Royce reasoned.

Much bowing and scraping accompanied the king’s passage through the antechamber as the lords and ladies opened a path for the sovereign and his train to proceed toward the White Hall. Whispers followed them and it bemused Royce to hear his own name repeated upon those noble lips as a “great Crusader knight” and “hero.”

Queen Isabella waited before the doors of the feasting hall, surrounded by her elegant ladies-in-waiting and flanked by the most powerful barons and clergy in attendance. At her husband's approach, she sank into a deep curtsy, a vision of exquisite beauty and grace. Though Royce had heard glowing descriptions of her comeliness, 'twas still jolting to behold the new queen in person — for reasons beyond her loveliness.

As Royce understood it, after John's coronation, he immediately set out on a tour of Normandy and the Aquitaine. There, he encountered the beautiful heiress of Angoulême, Isabella, and became wildly enamored of her. Inconveniently, she was already engaged.

When John made his intentions clear, Isabella's parents were all too happy that their daughter attain a queenship. They moved to break the engagement and arrange her hasty marriage to the English monarch. But scandal swirled darkly about the newly wedded couple. Whilst John was a man of prime years being two-and-thirty, Isabella was a child of barely twelve.

Royce pushed aside his thoughts as John took his young queen by the hand. Raising her to her feet, he pressed a lingering kiss to her fingers. By his look alone, 'twas plain the man was utterly besotted with his bride.

The king placed Isabella's small hand on his forearm, his larger one lingering to cover hers, then turned to Royce. "My lady-wife, this is Sir Royce de Warrene, the heroic knight of whom I spoke, just arrived from the Holy Lands. He warred with Richard there. I'm sure he will be agreeable to entertain us tonight with gallant tales of the Crusades and of the years since my late brother's departure from *Outremer*, the lands beyond the sea."

Royce bowed low and, at once, the diminutive queen lifted her free hand to him to be kissed.

"Rise, Sir Royce. I shall take pleasure in your stories of chivalry and am pleased that you are returned safe to England's shores."

Royce dropped a light kiss to the queen's ring then rose. He paused for a moment as he gazed upon her enchanting face. His brows began to draw together, then realizing the gesture, he willed them smooth lest others think he found displeasure with the queen.

In truth, Isabella reminded him of someone, but he could not quite puzzle out whom. She was a delicate creature with lively eyes. Her bright, flaxen hair draped over her shoulders in two long plaits, each wound with satin ribbons and ending in jeweled clasps. A veil of net spilled from her fair head, held in place by her queenly crown. Gemstones glittered on her mantle and gown, the latter a shimmering creation of gold sendal over an ivory undergown, all lavishly embroidered.

Royce regarded the queen for only a brief moment before she turned to gaze admiringly into her husband's eyes. Next, he found himself presented to the dignitaries surrounding the royal couple, among them Hubert Walter, the Archbishop of Canterbury; Geoffrey FitzPeter, the king's justicar; and most notable and impressive of all, the very paragon of knighthood itself, William Marshal, Earl of Pembroke and Lord of Leinster.

The earl took a keen interest in Royce and was just expressing his interest in hearing of the latest developments in the East when a fanfare of trumpets, drums, and pipes signaled the ceremonials for dinner to commence.

The king and queen led the procession into the hall, followed by the dignitaries and nobles in descending order of rank. Royce held back, waiting for the others to pass before he himself joined. But the king halted and gestured him forward, indicating he should remain near.

The White Hall proved to be a great aisled chamber, high-ceilinged and of significant expanse. Tapestries and painted screens enlivened the cold stone walls, warming them by color, if not in fact.

Tables, draped with snowy linens, lined the length of both sides of the hall. At the far end, the king's high table held place of precedence, situated upon a raised dais beneath a crimson canopy. Left of the dais stood the *aumbry*, a sideboard crowded with gold vessels, exhibiting the king's wealth. To the dais's right stood a separate table intended for the honored guests who, like the sovereigns, would be clearly visible to all in the hall.

As the king and queen assumed their places upon the dais in the sole company of the Earl of Pembroke and the Archbishop of Canterbury, Royce again found himself at a loss, wondering where exactly he should assume a place. Just then, the Marshal of the Hall appeared with his white wand and led him forward to the table of honor. Royce seated himself, amazed to find himself in company with such important personages of the realm.

A fresh flourish of trumpets announced the beginning of the rituals. Issuing from the kitchen passage at the opposite end of the hall emerged a procession of noble servitors and squires of gentle birth. First came the ewerer and his assistants, white cloths over their arms, bearing lavers and pitchers for the washing of hands. The king and queen were first attended then the other lords and ladies, their hands cleansed with fragrant herbal water.

Next in the cadre came the carver and cupbearer, the pantler and butler, and the almoner, who led the chamber in prayer. More servers followed bearing great platters of food and tureens of soups, comprising the first course — offerings of flesh, fish, and fowl. While the meats were sauced and broken, two noble youths paraded a subtlety around the room then set it upon a stand for viewing. Robert de Beaumont, Earl of Leicester, who sat beside Royce, informed him that the marzipan sculpture was of the queen's dower castle, gifted her upon her recent marriage to the king.

The bustle continued in the hall with a constant traffic of servers coming and going. The mingling of harp, dulcimer, and lutes played in the background while guests partook of the feast and chattered with their table mates. Minstrels, jugglers, and dancers entertained between courses while servers paraded the subtlety round the hall again. Trumpets heralded each new course, the multiplicity of dishes continuing — lampreys and eel dishes, venison pastries, stuffed pig, puddings, capons, woodcock, jellies and tarts, quince in comfit, almond cream, fried minnows, and more, all washed down with spiced wine and ale.

Royce restricted himself to a light sampling of a few dishes for the variety was staggering and more than he cared to manage. Throughout the meal he gave himself to answering his companions' questions. As he was discussing recent events in Jaffa, he caught sight of the two women who'd taken a sharp interest in him earlier in the antechamber. They sat with a third woman, a matron, perhaps in her early thirties. She stared at him with dark, compelling eyes, then tipped her head toward the other two, asking some question, her gaze never leaving him.

"Beware, Sir Royce," Lord Robert advised good-naturedly. "That is Lady Sibylla, Countess Linford, a fine catch for her wealth and estates, though she's buried three husbands to manage it. She's known to be looking for fresh prey and has a particular liking for men younger than she." His smile disappeared behind his goblet as he downed its contents.

Again the trumpets blared, declaring the final course. But before the procession of food began, a single youth — one of the ushers of the hall — appeared. He ran toward the dais and dropped to one knee, flustered.

"Your Highness forgive me. I tried to stop him but—"

An aged noble entered the hall, his hair like snow and his robes a rich brocade edged with marten. He made his way slowly, painfully, down the length of the hall with the aid of two canes

and servants supporting him on either side. With dragging steps he came to stand before the main dais.

“Majesty, a thousand pardons,” the man said in a deep booming voice, bowing as low as he could manage. His servants aided him upright once more.

“I am Lord Gilbert Osborne of Penhurst and I seek the knight, Royce de Warrene. On good word, I am told he landed at Dover two days before last and departed there for Westminster Palace. Happily, I was at Canterbury when news of his return reached my ears.”

The king exchanged a swift glance with Royce. “Dover’s scribes are far busier than I imagined,” he uttered in obvious amazement, his brows arching high.

The old lord shifted his weight, leaning heavily on his canes. “Sire, I have urgent business with the knight. ‘Tis a matter of honor and of dire urgency. If he be present, pray direct me to him.”

Royce rose slowly, purposefully to his feet. “I am he whom you seek,” he said, his rich voice carrying through the hall. “I am Royce de Warrene.”

Lord Gilbert turned and fastened his eyes on him. For a moment he held silent. Then his features twisted, a mixture of anger and torment flooding his features. He shuffled his stance and turned back toward the dais.

“Majesty, I demand justice!” he bellowed, striking the floor with his cane.

Murmurs rippled along the high table and throughout the hall.

“Justice?” the king blustered, his expression confounded. “Sir Royce has just this hour arrived, returned after a decade in the Holy Lands. What possible justice could you seek?”

“Justice for a grave wrong he has committed regarding my granddaughter!”

Gasps echoed all around and many a lady’s eyes leapt to Royce, stabbing him with knifelike looks as though he’d wronged all womankind.

“I know not of what you speak,” Royce stated flatly, maddened to be falsely accused and denounced before all. “Ever have I acted honorably toward those of the gentle sex. Never have I brought ill on the least of them. Who is your granddaughter, sir?”

“The lady Juliana Mandeville, child of my daughter, Alyce, and of the great Marcher lord, Robert Mandeville, God rest their souls. Surely, you know of Sir Robert. He served King Richard on Crusade. ‘Twas at Acre he fell.”

A face and blue banner flashed in Royce’s mind. “I recall the knight, but I know nothing of his daughter.”

“Ah but you do!” The old man jabbed at the air with one of his canes. “And because of you, she has been lost to me these many long years. I demand you restore her to me!”

Again the hall erupted in murmurings and babble. Royce steeled himself, a knot forming in his chest.

“Upon my honor, I know naught of what you speak. But if I have unknowingly wronged the lady, I shall right it.”

“Aye, upon your honor, right it you will!” the old man snapped. “Hear me out then.”

Gathering his composure, Lord Gilbert bid his servant bring his folding stool. This done, he lowered himself onto the piece with considerable effort and continued to grip his canes before him. Silence fell over the hall, its occupants’ attention fixed upon the old lord as he began to address them.

Glancing to the royal minstrel who stood right of the dais with his lute in hand, Lord Gilbert gave him a nod. “Take heed of my words if it pleases you, for ‘tis a doleful tale, worthy to be remembered in verse, though at present it owns no end.”

Pausing, the old lord drew his gaze over those in the hall, lingering momentarily on Royce, then bringing it finally to settle on the king and his young queen, who appeared particularly enrapt by his presence. Lord Gilbert drew a deep breath.

“Ten years past, when the Lionheart put forth the call to arms for the Third Crusade, my son-in-law, Sir Robert Mandeville, crossed the Channel with his soldiers to meet the king at Vézelay. His wife — my daughter, Alyce — and their only child Juliana, accompanied him as far as Rouen. My own wife, Thérèse, God rest her soul, was of French birth. Alyce, our daughter, desired to visit her mother’s relatives, something she was accustomed to do every several years.

“From Rouen Sir Robert sent Alyce and the child on with a small host of men-at-arms to Senlis, where they visited a widowed aunt. From there, they journeyed southward, destined for Châlon, where a second aunt lived in cloister. Their travels brought them to the village of Vaux, where they stopped to seek lodging for the night with the local lord.”

Royce kept his gaze fixed rigidly on the old lord, masking all emotion from his features as the memories of that long-ago night swarmed back in all its harsh detail.

Lord Gilbert shifted on the stool. “Tragically, that very night the village and manor were attacked and laid waste.” Tears collected in his pale eyes. “The source of the attack remains in question even after these many years, though ‘tis suspected a feud amongst the French nobles lay at its cause. The lord of Vaux was not without enemies. To point, the attackers specifically sought out all those of noble blood and put them to the sword. Evidently, ‘twas their intent to exterminate the lord and all his kindred.”

Lord Gilbert bowed his snowy head, his voice quavering. “My daughter, Alyce, was among those slain. But the child, Juliana, was never found.”

The hall remained hushed as a tomb. Royce closed his lids, remembering the death and wreckage in the manor house, envisaging the noblewoman laying dead in the rushes, blood saturating her golden hair. Fallen about were her personal guards. He’d wondered at the time about their blue-and-silver livery, which differed so markedly from that of the other guards. Now he understood. The lady was of another, much nobler house. She was Alyce Mandeville.

Royce took a deep swallow and opened his eyes. Directly across from him, Lord Gilbert drew a handkerchief from his sleeve and mopped his face and wiped at his eyes. He then struggled to his feet, his eyes and features enlivening as a fresh fury stole into his face. He turned and cast Royce a searing look.

“These long years have I searched for my granddaughter. This much have I learned — Sir Hugh FitzAlan and his men came upon Vaux that murderous night and aided the survivors to a neighboring village. A child fitting little Juliana’s description was seen directly after the attack, in the care of Sir Hugh’s own squire. Apparently, she held a particular liking for the lad and rode clinging to him all the way to Vincelles, where he gave her to a peasant family — the village brewer and his wife.”

Royce wavered at the revelation then clenched his hands to fists as Lord Gilbert continued his tale.

“For these many long years, I have searched tirelessly for my granddaughter but, alas, to no avail. The brewer soon left Vincelles with his little family to seek better fortune elsewhere, using the coin the squire reportedly gave him.”

He stabbed Royce with another accusing look then turned toward the dais once more.

“There is no way to know if Juliana yet lives, but her looks are as exceptional as they are distinctive — silvery blonde hair, eyes like emeralds, and a distinctive mole marking the corner of her upper left lip.”

Ana. With crystalline clarity, Royce recalled the angelic creature who'd wrapped herself around his person and around his heart. He stole a swift glance at the queen then dropped his gaze away. 'Twas Ana of whom the child queen reminded him, not in age but in her glowing beauty, pale as the moon. Royce's pulse drubbed heavily in his veins. How was he to have known the child was of noble blood?

Lord Gilbert's thundering voice jerked Royce's attention back to the hall.

"Sir Hugh and his retainers were in such haste to join the Lionheart that they took no time to inquire about those in their care," he railed, his features collecting into a choleric mien.

Turning, he raised his cane and shook it accusingly at Royce.

"'Twas *you* who served as squire to Sir Hugh. You, Royce de Warrene, are the one who gave my highborn granddaughter into the charge of peasants, robbing her of her birthright, her station, and what is left of her family — me, her grandfather!"

Royce started to speak, to tell Lord Gilbert how, at the time, he'd sought to find the child's relatives among the survivors of Vaux, to tell him how she'd called herself only "Ana," obviously not remembering the full of her name. But the girl had been severely distraught by the butchery she'd witnessed. As Royce opened his mouth to say as much, the old lord cut short his words.

"Juliana is my only surviving blood relative and I, hers. My days grow short. I am unwell and nearly crippled, as you can well see, and I am unable to continue my search."

A fit of coughing overtook Lord Gilbert. Somewhat defeated, he lowered himself onto the stool, his servants bracing him. His throat settled, and he lifted his gaze toward the dais, a great sadness in his eyes.

"If there be one thing I wish above all in this life, 'tis to behold my little Juliana with these old eyes before I close them forever. God willing I shall."

He struggled once more to his feet, seemingly gathering the last of his strength about him.

"Majesty, when I heard of Royce de Warrene's return, I recognized his name and came at once to find him. Now I demand justice — that Sir Royce take up my quest and find Juliana and restore her to me and to her rightful place as a highborn lady and heiress. Sir Royce, I demand you right the wrong you wrought so many years ago."

Royce stood stunned, unable to find his voice. Clearly he was at fault and Lord Gilbert's outrage justified. His unwitting mistake tore at the fabric of his honor and stained his very name as a worthy knight of the realm.

The queen moved first. Visibly touched, she laid her hand on the king's arm and leaned toward him to whisper in his ear.

John's lips parted in a wide smile. "Yes, my dear, a quest. How splendid! Just as in days of old, and here we have a knight of renown to see the quest through," he blurted triumphantly, like a delighted child.

The queen smiled, clapping her hands together as rumbles of approval reverberated throughout the hall. The king rose from his place, assuming a more sober aspect.

"Upon my oath, no domain under my crown shall lose even one of its fair damsels," he proclaimed magnanimously. "Sir Royce, as a knight of the realm, you are bound to defend — and rescue — maidens in distress. Considering your role in the matter, I charge you with this quest. Find the heiress Juliana Mandeville by whatever means you must and restore her to her grandfather, Lord Gilbert Osborne."

The king stepped from the dais, approached Lord Gilbert, and proffered him his royal hand and ring, which the old lord kissed. John then crossed to where Royce stood at his place.

“We will talk anon of your lands, Sir Royce. My counselors will have the details sorted out by the time you return and your quest is complete. There will be a boon for you when you do,” he added cheerfully. “The court looks forward to your swift return. After all, how many places can an heiress hide?”

“Indeed, Majesty.” Royce forced the words past his lips, still reeling from the swift turn of events and subsequent royal command.

The king started toward the dais then halted and turned back. “Report to my scribe. He shall draw up letters of introduction and authority in the matter. Perhaps Lord Gilbert will wish to add his own letters to these.”

Royce reined his emotions, his years of training and discipline taking over as he embraced his knightly duty. Wrong must be set to right, especially since he was the cause of that disservice. ‘Twas long ago at Vincelles that he committed himself to succoring the weak and the powerless — for “all the little Anas of the world,” he’d avowed. Now, duty and destiny called that he, once more, aid Ana herself.

Royce bowed deeply to the king and queen.

“Majesties, by your leave, I shall hasten to Dover and set sail on the first ship for Boulogne. By God’s grace when you next see me ‘twill be with the heiress, Juliana Mandeville, at my side.”

Chapter 3

*Chinon, in the region of Touraine, France —
one of the Plantagenet domains of King John*

Ana silently slipped her cloak from the peg by the door and stepped out of the house into the predawn quiet. The chilled fresh air of early morn nipped at her cheeks and nose while somewhere in the dark a lone dog barked. Obviously, like herself, the animal could not sleep.

Traveling to the end of the narrow street, Ana headed for the main square, anxious to reach it before the first rays of light fell over Chinon and turned its walled castle and the cliff it sat upon all to gold. 'Twas a spectacle she loved to behold. This would be her last time to steal out so freely and do so — leastwise, as a maiden. Today was her wedding day.

Ana turned onto a crooked lane, hastening her steps past half-timbered houses, squeezed side to side. Again a dog barked while the tantalizing aromas of hot bread and meat broth teased at her nostrils, masking the foul odors that ever pervaded the streets. Ana continued on, her heart beating light and quick. In minutes, she emerged onto the square.

Already there was some movement there. A pair of veiled-and-wimpled matrons ambled toward the well at the square's center, their buckets looped over their arms, their heads together as they shared some tattle. Several merchants opened the horizontal shutters on their store fronts, propping the topmost plank upward to create a canopy and dropping the lower one onto legs to serve as a counter to display goods and conduct business.

Directly across from Ana rose the substantial church of St. Maurice, dominating all else on the square. Her lips parted in a smile. In the coming hours, she would stand upon the church's hallowed steps for all to see and exchange marriage vows with Gervase.

She drew her cloak snugly about her, thoroughly content. Was she not the most fortunate maid of Chinon, to have won the cooper's heart? Gervase was a good, God-fearing man, dependable, pleasant to look upon, and the owner of a profitable and stable business — making wooden casks. He would be amply able to provide a secure life for a wife and family.

She was indeed lucky to be marrying such a man. Life would be good with Gervase, well worth her wait to marry. And she'd waited longer than most maids. Some, including her foster mother, Marie, feared she might never agree to wed. But, then, they didn't understand her reasons — deep, heart-held reasons — for waiting.

Out of habit, Ana lifted her hand to the silver cross suspended on a chain about her neck and closed her fingers around it. She doubted anyone could understand her feelings even if she attempted to explain them. Why even begin?

Her thoughts went back to her bridegroom, a warm joy spreading through her.

Gervase had struck a friendship with her foster father more than a year ago. On the occasion of her eighteenth Name Day — a day chosen randomly since she knew not her true one — she relented and decided to accept Gervase's suit, which he'd been pressing for nearly six months. Since their betrothal, four weeks past, she and her foster mother had prepared for the happy event, baking endlessly and making great quantities of fresh ale and beer, which now filled Gervase's new casks.

Ana blew at a wisp of hair that had fallen across her forehead and eyes, then released a breezy sigh. 'Twas a fine match and she cared deeply for Gervase. She'd been fortunate to be

able to choose a spouse for love. And it was that — love. After all, true love involved deep respect and fond regard for one another, beyond simple attraction or momentary desire.

Yes, she loved Gervase and he loved her. 'Twas evident by the sparkle of longing ever present in his eyes when they were near. Admittedly, much of that “sparkle” had to do with Gervase’s anticipation of their wedding night. He did naught to conceal it. Still, she knew he loved her.

A fluttery sensation, akin to a host of butterflies, rose from her stomach and flittered upward, inside her chest. A few days past, her foster mother had explained the physical aspects of marriage and what she might expect. When Ana had expressed shock, Marie quickly assured she need not worry. Gervase was a mild-mannered man and would likely be a considerate lover, especially during their first couplings.

Ripples of unease traveled through Ana. She could not think on these things or the night to come. Her foster parents’ own relationship seemed happy in all regards. She would draw encouragement from that. Surely she would survive Gervase’s passion and possession of her. In time, perhaps, she’d come to even welcome it.

Bird chatter began to fill the air as the first rays of dawn spilled over the city and into the square. Ana raised her eyes toward the sprawling fortress on the cliff as both began to glow. She inhaled a deep, renewing breath and smiled. 'Twas going to be a splendid day.

Just as the castle and cliff magically paled to gold, the clatter of a horse’s hooves sounded on the cobblestones, drawing her gaze. Ana retreated into the shadows of the nearest building to watch as a single rider appeared on the square astride a large black stallion. He rode apace, heading directly toward the lord mayor’s dwelling, which stood adjacent to the church.

As Ana continued to observe him, the women at the well scuttled off. She sharpened her gaze over the stranger. He was impressive in size and bearing, attired in knightly garb — a long, sleeveless surcoat worn over a hauberk and leggings of mail. A close-fitting hood of additional mail covered his head, while a bright scarlet mantle flowed from his shoulders. Facially, she could discern little of his features owing to his mustache and beard, though both were neatly trimmed. Drinking in the sight of him, her gaze drifted slowly downward then stopped at the great sword he wore at his hip.

A sudden sense of foreboding washed through her. Ana clutched the cross in her hand once more as she watched the knight dismount and approach the entrance to the lord mayor’s residence. As he disappeared inside, she shook off the prickly feelings, aware that the fine hairs on the back of her neck and arms had lifted on end.

Ana clamped down on her emotions. Strangers in the city were not uncommon. Obviously, with day breaking, the night guard had opened the city gates and permitted entry to those who waited without. The knight’s business lay with the lord mayor and had nothing to do with her. She’d not dwell on him one moment longer.

But the fluttery feeling she’d felt in her stomach and chest moments before had turned to lead. Ana set her jaw. She refused to believe in omens. 'Twas the sight of the knight’s sword that unsettled her so, that and no more. Such weapons ever conjured dark memories from her past.

Ana turned on her heel and quit the square. Retracing her steps back along the crooked street, she quickened toward her foster parents’ house, forcing her thoughts to the hours ahead and the coming celebration.

'Twas her wedding day, and she’d allow nothing to spoil it.

Hours later, the wedding party swept Ana and Gervase along the streets of Chinon amidst great noise and merriment. Musicians led the procession, skipping about as they played bright tunes on their flutes and tamped out rhythms on beribboned tambours.

Well-wishers and onlookers joined the festivities along the way, many offering jovial advice to the bridegroom for the wedding night. Gervase laughed good-naturedly and replied with his own cheerful banter. When his twinkling gaze fell upon Ana, consuming her whole, heat shot to her cheeks and she felt herself blush completely.

In truth, Ana found his attentions most flattering. She smiled up at him, feeling radiant and pretty in her new dress, a light green wool, embroidered about the neck and sleeves. A circlet of flowers crowned her wealth of pale hair, flowing freely past her waist. Completing her bridal dress, soft leather slippers adorned her feet. Beside her, Gervase looked wonderfully handsome, clean and smooth shaven and dressed in his best clothes.

Happiness filled Ana's heart. After the nuptials and mass, the wedding party would return to her foster parents' home to feast and dance and sing till dark. A bubbling pork stew awaited them, plus rounds of barley bread, fish pasties, and eggs by the dozens. To wash it all down, there was a plentitude of ale and beer and even a barrel of watered wine — gift of a local vintner and patron of Gervase's fine casks.

As the party progressed through the winding streets, their numbers rapidly multiplied, swelling to a sizable crowd as they entered the main square and advanced toward St. Maurice. Ana looked expectantly to the great arched doors where the priest would emerge momentarily, carrying an open Bible and the wedding rings.

Gervase gave an affectionate squeeze to her hand as they began to mount the church steps. She smiled into his brown eyes. In scant moments they would speak their vows and be joined for the rest of their mortal lives. Today would be one of the most important and memorable occasions they would ever experience.

Transferring her gaze to the church's central door, she saw it slowly draw open and the priest's figure appear. As he stepped from the church's dim interior into the light, she noted that Pere Armand did not appear his normal, robust self. Rather, he looked ill, his face pinched and his complexion waxen. Ana's gaze fell to his hands and found they were empty.

Before she could think on it, a movement just behind the priest drew her eyes. In the next instant, the blur sharpened into the figure of a man. As he came to stand beside the priest, she recognized him at once as the stranger she'd observed at dawn.

The knight was impressive in stature and commanding in presence, much taller than she'd expected and exceedingly broad-shouldered. She saw now that the surcoat he wore over his mail was deep blue, enhancing the color of his eyes. Those eyes sought hers at once, their expression containing a vibrant intensity that sent bolts of apprehension flashing through her.

The priest suddenly cleared his throat and turned to the knight. "This is Ana of whom I spoke, the daughter of Georges, the brewer, and his wife, Marie. Does she favor the maid you seek?"

The knight swept a long gaze over her, from the top of her flowered head down to her slippered toes and back, skimming everything between, then lingering a moment at the mole on her upper lip. A muscle moved in his cheek as he locked his eyes with hers.

"'Tis she," he declared in a rich, full voice, his words filled with certainty.

Ana's eyes widened at the exchange, heat shimmering through her at the knight's intimate perusal.

Maid you seek?

She looked to Pere Armand, then Gervase. Her bridegroom made not the slightest move to intervene on her behalf, but stood gaping at the knight. In truth, no one in the crowd so much as twitched, their gazes riveted on the stranger. Glancing to her foster parents, she saw alarm piercing their eyes, their hands gripped together as they took measure of the man.

Ana returned her gaze to the imposing knight. For what possible reason did he meddle here, spoiling her wedding day? Seeing that he continued to scrutinize her, she jutted her chin upward, a spark of defiance emboldening her.

“Pere Armand, am I to be examined like goods at market on the church steps when I have come to wed? Pray tell this knight to seek elsewhere for a maid if he be in need of one. I am bespoken for. Pray, let us begin the ceremony that Gervase and I might speak our vows and marry.”

“That will not be allowed!” the knight declared, his tone sharp, commanding, possessive.

Ana went to stone as gasps broke among the crowd. Whether ‘twas due to her boldness or the knight’s swift temper she could not say, their words had flown so fast.

His gray-blue eyes continued to bore into her. They held a vague familiarity. Ana shook away the notion. Impossible, she told herself, a flood of indignation welling inside her. What right had this stranger to interfere here, particularly in her choice of a husband? Plucking up her courage, she faced him squarely.

“I assure you I will marry whomever I please, Sir Knight.” She managed to hold his gaze without flinching, though inside she quivered like a mass of half-baked pudding.

“Child, mind your tongue!” Pere Armand admonished. “This is Sir Royce de Warrene. He comes at the behest of King John of England, our own liege lord, and also at the urging of a certain Lord Gilbert Osborne.”

Smarting at his rebuke, Ana directed her gaze to the priest. At the same time she wondered why Gervase still stood beside her like a log and said naught.

She afforded the churchman her sweetest smile, hoping her effort didn’t appear forced. “How agreeable that the knight is acquainted with such imminent personages, but what has that to do with me?”

“Lord Gilbert seeks his lost granddaughter, Juliana Mandeville,” the priest offered.

Ana flicked a glance to the knight and back. “Then I wish Lord Gilbert good fortune in finding her, but this knight is mistook if he believes me to be able to help. I know nothing of this Juliana Mandeville.”

Nervously, Pere Armand rubbed his hands together, one within the other. “The girl disappeared ten years ago, from the village of Vaux on the night of its burning.”

Ana’s heart jolted in its place at the implication of his words. Still, she refused to grant them any significance in regard to herself.

The knight stepped forward, claiming her attention. Again he studied her with intense, probing eyes. His gaze swept to Georges and Marie then back again.

“Is it not true that the brewer and his wife are not your natural parents, but rather, your foster parents? In fact, you were brought from Vaux on the night it was savagely attacked and given to their care in the neighboring village of Vincelles, ten years ago.”

Ana felt the blood drain from her face that this stranger should have such knowledge of her past. “That night is most painful to me. Why do you resurrect it on my wedding day? If you must know, I was orphaned that night. I am the only surviving daughter of the miller of Vaux.”

“Of the *miller*? Do you not know—?” The knight halted his words, surprise touching his eyes. He began to speak again but stayed what he would say once more. “Have you no memories of that night, or of your people?” he asked at last.

Ana shifted her weight from one foot to the other. “A few memories of the attack. Nothing before it. Nothing of my kindred either,” she admitted, feeling a familiar pang in her heart.

The images of fire and bloodied swords flashed before her mind’s eye. She pressed her lashes shut, thrusting back the disturbing pictures and casting them into the recesses of her mind.

“I am Ana, the miller’s daughter, none other,” she stated flatly, her breathing suddenly shallow and quick, her patience short. “The one who found me claimed it to be so for he’d also discovered my family laying slain in the grass nearby. Now, if you please—”

“The lad was mistaken, fair maid,” the knight spoke softly, a note of sadness — or was it regret? — in his voice.

“’Twas not your family who lay there, though indeed ’twas the miller’s. In truth, you are the daughter of Sir Robert Mandeville and his wife, Lady Alyce.”

Ana’s eyes snapped to the knight’s. Again it perturbed her that he should possess such details of her life. How could he possibly know of her squire?

“Tragically, Lady Alyce died that night during the attack on Vaux and your father later, whilst on Crusade,” he continued. “Your grandfather has searched for you these many years, but now he is too enfeebled to continue and the quest has been given to me.”

“*Quest?*”

“Aye. I am charged with the task of finding you and returning you to your grandfather in England, where you will take your rightful place as a highborn lady and Lord Gilbert’s sole heir.”

“Nay, that cannot be so!” Ana reeled round to Gervase and gripped his forearms, her eyes pleading for help. But she found only confusion in his face. Shaken, she darted a glance to her foster parents, then to the priest.

“Someone tell him, I am not this Juliana. My place is here in Chinon at my husband’s side.” Even as the words left her lips, a crushing feeling overtook her. Would no one help her?

Gervase finally moved. He took her hands in his and fumbled with her fingers, seemingly unable to find his tongue. He searched her face with a questioning, confounded look. Meanwhile, the murmurings among the crowd increased in her ears. A surprising number seemed pleased with this turn of fate.

“This man is not your husband,” the knight spoke again, his voice weighted with galling authority. “Be warned, any marriage made without Lord Gilbert’s permission will be promptly annulled.”

Anger boiled up in Ana’s soul. Quest or not, the man had no right to appear on the church steps on her wedding day to seize control of her life in the name of another.

Frantically, she searched her memories, reaching back to that night long ago, striving to press past it to find the name Alyce or anything that might reveal the truth of her parentage and station. But she could find naught but darkness there. Darkness, except for her squire.

Ana could still remember first seeing his handsome face as he lifted the boat and discovered her crouched beneath. Remembered traveling the road to Vincelles, snuggled against him on his fine mount. ’Twas the only memory that lingered bright and undiminished in her mind — that and being given over to the care of Georges and Marie and then the misery of her squire’s departure.

Ana looked to the knight. Why did he come this day to ruin the life she'd come to know and love? The entirety of her life's memory was confined to a few slender years, most spent happily here, in Chinon. Now when she would marry a man she loved, one well regarded by her foster family and who could provide her with a secure future, the knight sought to alter her life's course, snatch her from her home, and place her under the mastery of strangers.

Though her memory may be faulty, Ana knew one thing with certainty. The world was an unpredictable and frighteningly dangerous place. Happiness, and all that was known and dependable, could be lost in the blink of an eye. Georges and Marie had restored the gift of joy to her heart. Still, she craved the familiar — nay, she clung to it. And even more important, she coveted security. Now, callously, this man would rip her away from all she held dear.

Just then the knight moved forward and lifted his gloved hand to take her arm. Ana bristled.

"I assure you, I am not the maid you seek. I am but a commoner, 'tis plain to see."

The knight's eyes widened a fraction, then narrowed. "Your manners may be that of a commoner, but your blood is most noble. The mistake made long ago must be righted. You will be restored to your grandfather who waits for you across the Channel at the court of King John."

"A second mistake will not right the first." She glared at him. "I possess no drop of noble blood, and I'll not leave my home and family for an alien shore and nameless faces. Pray, leave me in peace to wed my copper. What possible difference could it make to you?"

"*Difference?*" he barked, his color rising, challenge in his tone.

Ana drew back toward Gervase, panic churning in her breast as anger flashed across the knight's features. She'd stung his pride. Or was it his honor? Knights were so full of the one and zealously protective of the other. 'Twas unwise to inflict a dent in either.

"What difference amending the past — *your* past — makes to me is not at issue," he ground out. "By orders of King John — Chinon's liege lord as Duke of Normandy and the Aquitaine — you are required to accompany me to the royal court in England."

"I will not!" Ana gasped out, then realized no one moved to help her. She cast her gaze over the stunned crowd. "This knight plays me a sorry jest and on my wedding day. Will no one stop him? Gervase? Pere Armand? How can you allow him to take me?"

Ana heard the desperation in her voice and despised her sense of powerlessness. In the next moment, Georges and Marie hurried to her side, wholly distressed, her foster mother enveloping her in her arms. Ana gathered her strength, hardening her resolve.

"I'll go nowhere!" She hurled the words with defiance then turned to those gathered before the church. "This knight has yet to present one scrap of proof to support his claims. He has no authority over my person. Perhaps he means harm to me, sent for some vile purpose."

"Enough! Bind your tongue, maid," the knight bellowed. "If 'tis proof you desire, you shall have it."

He reached beneath his surcoat and withdrew a packet. As he opened it out, it proved to be two leaves of parchments folded together, one bearing a large red seal.

"Any schooled in letters may inspect these documents for themselves," the knight called loudly, holding up the pages. "One contains the king's commission, granting me authority in the matter of the heiress, Juliana Mandeville. The other is a missive rendered in Lord Gilbert's own hand. "In it, Lord Gilbert outlines the dates and circumstances that brought Lady Alyce and her child to Vaux on the night of its destruction. He also gives a detailed description of his granddaughter." His eyes fixed on Ana. "Lord Gilbert writes that she possess hair of a rare, silvery blonde color and eyes like emeralds. He adds that she can be identified by a distinguishing mark — a mole upon the upper left corner of her lip."

The knight's gaze shifted to the mole Ana bore upon her lip, just so, then to her fall of silvery hair. He then stared straight into her eyes — eyes Ana had ever been told shone like emeralds.

"All these traits you possess, fair maid." The knight continued to hold her gaze.

She gave a laugh, half choking. "'Tis hardly proof at all! Maids other than myself own such features."

Ana felt herself flush as the knight's eyes drew to the chain she wore about her neck, tracing it to where it disappeared into the top of her gown.

"There is one thing more," he said, his tone weighted. "On the night of the attack on Vaux, when Sir Hugh FitzAlan and his soldiers escorted the survivors to Vincelles, you rode with his squire. Is that so?"

"*Oui*, 'tis so." Her heart picked up its beat. She distrusted the path of his questions.

"Before he departed, the squire gifted you with something personal, something that belonged to him alone — a silver cross."

"You can't possibly know that." Shaken, she stepped free of Marie's arms, back and down one step, then another.

The knight tracked her steps as he came forward and began to descend. "The cross once belonged to the squire's own father. On the back side it bears an inscription — the knights' ancient and hallowed oath, *'Par bouche et des mains, je suis votre homme.'* 'By mouth and by hand, I am your man.'"

"Nay!" The denial burst from her lips, her heart plummeting.

Halting on the step above her, scarcely a breath apart, the knight removed his gloves and reached forth. His fingertips grazed the swell of her breasts as he drew the chain forth from her gown, exposing a silver cross. Turning it to its back side, he held up the piece and displayed the engraving there.

"Let this cross stand as proof for any who require it," he proclaimed for all to hear.

Ana bent her head, feeling as if her heart had been torn from her chest. Somehow she found her voice and offered a final protest.

"The cross proves only that I am the girl the squire found in Vaux. There could still be a mistake."

"Patience, my child," Pere Armand soothed, coming forth to stand beside the knight.

"Perhaps, on meeting with Lord Gilbert, he will confirm you are not his granddaughter after all, and you will be allowed to return to us." His gaze swiveled toward the knight. "She will be free to do so in that event, will she not?"

"I will escort her myself," the knight vowed.

Ana knew she should take solace in that, but she could read in the knight's eyes he held no doubt as to her identity. He'd not the slightest expectation of returning with her to Chinon.

"So shall it be then. We must abide by the king's command." Pere Armand looked to Ana. "There is no other choice."

Ana steeled herself at the truthfulness of those words. "'Twould seem not," she said through stiff lips. "Certainly not for a simple maid, even on her wedding day."

She glowered at the knight — a man who so willingly would ruin her life at the behest of his king. His heart must be of stone.

"I shall hold you to your word, Sir Knight. Upon this cross, I shall." She snatched back the holy object from his fingers and enclosed it protectively in her hand.

The maid's eyes continued to slash at Royce, two green shards, stabbing him with her anger. She looked to detest him wholly — loathe him, even. Royce expelled a long breath. This encounter had not proceeded at all well, certainly not as he'd hoped.

Royce had been elated this morn when his latest lead proved fruitful and the lord mayor confirmed a maid fitting Juliana's description lived in Chinon. By God's grace, he'd arrived barely in time to prevent the disaster of the noble heiress marrying a commoner.

Admittedly, Royce had been astounded by the maid's transformation from a mere twig of a girl into a ravishing young woman. Still, there could be no mistake as to her identity. Aside from her distinctive features, he recognized the brewer and his wife. Though much older now, he'd placed them at once as the couple to whom he gave the child "Ana" that fateful night in Vaux. Like the maid, however, neither appeared to recognize him.

The thought nettled, particularly that Juliana showed no sign of knowing who he was. 'Twas understandable. Last she'd seen him, he was a bony, bare-faced lad, yet to sprout into his height. Then too, his coif of mail concealed most of his head and all of his hair. His mustache and beard masked everything beneath his nose and cheekbones. What could she see of his face but his brows, eyes, and nose?

In truth, Royce had intended to reveal himself as the squire who'd found her beneath the boat — not that he was eager to make known his role in losing the little heiress and displacing her amongst the peasantry. But the maid's stubborn defiance and sharp tongue allowed him no opportunity to do so at first. When she disclosed that she held no memories of her past, not even of her true parents, the revelation gave him pause. He'd expected her to recall something of her family and be agreeable, if not pleased, to accompany him to her homeland and to her grandfather.

The maid continued to blister him with her look. He need tell her he was the one responsible for leaving her at Vincelles. But not now, not here. She'd challenged every word to cross his lips thus far. Coupled with the fact that she didn't recognize him, 'twas unlikely she'd believe what he had to say. That would leave them arguing further still on the church steps before all. Best to tell her later, without a crowd surrounding them. As for her foster parents, he deemed 'twould make little difference whether he revealed his past identity or not. More importantly, he was the one who prepared to take Juliana from them now.

Royce glanced to the brewer and his wife, saw the heartbreak in their eyes that he should deprive them of the child they'd raised. He felt like the lowest of wretches to cause them this misery.

"Do not be distressed," he heartened. "Your foster daughter — once acknowledged as Juliana Mandeville — will assume her rightful place and live with great advantages as a noble lady and heiress. What more could be desired?" The words rang hollowly in his own ears.

He cleared his throat. "I have been authorized to generously compensate you for your privation."

Actually he had not, but witnessing these people's anguish, he felt moved to do so. Pulling a pouch of coins from his belt, he looked between the maid's foster parents and her bridegroom. In fairness, he need compensate the cooper as well. After all, he was depriving the man of a wife.

Royce emptied half the coins into his palm and gave them to the brewer. He then handed the remainder to the cooper, who seemed quite astonished by the sum.

The maid crossed her arms, fury firing her features. "I am not a parcel of goods to be bartered or sold!"

Royce turned his attention to her, a weariness setting into his bones. "For both our sakes, I advise that you hold rein on your tongue. By order of the king, you *will* come with me and do as you are required."

Her look darkened. "Be assured, I have no desire to come with you. If you dare to take me from Chinon, I promise, you will be most sorry!"

"I already am," Royce replied tiredly, a pain piercing his temples.

"I shall go neither willingly nor quietly, and I vow to resist you at every turn."

"Be that as it may, still you will go. Now, have you belongings you wish to collect from your home?"

She raised her chin. "What possessions I have shall remain here, awaiting my return."

"So be it. Let us not tarry then. Make your farewells and we shall depart."

Royce waited as the maid hugged her foster parents fiercely, then bestowed a kiss on the cooper's cheek. "Wait for me," she said through her tears.

Royce signaled to the lad whom he'd employed to tend his horse and bid him to lead the stallion forward. With his quest complete, he chafed to be away with the maid.

Seeing now how she stood motionless and wide-eyed before the monstrous-size horse, Royce afforded her a smile.

"Until I can secure a gentle palfrey for you, we'll ride together."

"We will not!" she cried, appearing scandalized to the marrow.

By all that was holy, would the maid give him no respite? Undeterred, Royce swung the maid up in his arms and tossed her onto the stallion's back. He then climbed up behind her. She gasped as he wrapped his arm around her waist and drew her back firmly against his torso.

As he turned his mount, she twisted in his arms to glimpse the faces of her foster parents and cooper a final time.

"I'll soon return," she called out, determination and hope mingling with her promise.

Urging the stallion forward, Royce rode from the church square, the beautiful, yet mettlesome maiden captive in his arms as he departed Chinon.

Chapter 4

The city of Tours, a day later

“I’ll *not* ride. I choose to walk.” Ana crossed her arms over her chest, her brows knocked together as she scowled her best at the overbearing knight.

“‘Twill be no kindness to your feet. ‘Tis a long walk to Boulogne,” he replied as he fed an apple to his horse.

By the crispness of his tone and the narrowing of his eyes, Ana knew she tested the limits of the man’s patience. Well, he’d brought it upon himself and she’d warned him full well. He’d find her to be neither docile nor compliant if he purposed to see through his “quest.” ‘Twas no less than an abduction, royally sanctioned or otherwise. And he deserved no less than her contempt.

“There is nothing the matter with my feet.” She notched her chin, and thus her nose, into the air, aware how the other travelers in their company slid glances their way.

“There may be naught the matter with your feet, but the same cannot be said of your slippers. They are not intended for trekking long distances over rugged roads and will soon be in shreds, and your feet bleeding.”

“I am not so fragile as you assume, Sir Knight. I am accustomed to walking and will do so, as will most of our companions.” She nodded to the sundry band of pilgrims, tinkers, tradesmen, scholars, religious, and more as they assembled at St. Martin’s tomb, on the city’s west side, preparing to depart on the main road north.

Pivoting on her heel, Ana mentally closed the matter and stalked gracelessly away to join the others. Against her better judgment, she cast a glance back over her shoulder only to find fire kindling in the knight’s eyes. She smiled inwardly, taking a perverse pleasure in the knowledge she’d aroused his ire, which, as a noble knight, he was bound to hold in check. ‘Twould be unchivalrous to reproach a “lady” publicly, she mused.

Moving toward the back of what might loosely be called the retinue’s line — a jumble of people, donkeys, packhorses, carts, dogs, and crates of chickens — she released a long sigh. The knight was entitled to be angry, she supposed. When he failed to find a suitable horse for her to ride, he sold his fine saddle for one of different design, fitted with a small cushion at the back. It would allow her to ride behind him “pillion,” as he called it. She was unsure how, exactly, one rode pillion but she was certain she’d not like it.

“Hannibal will not harm you, if that is your concern,” the knight called, breaking into her thoughts as he led the beast forward by the reins and rejoined her. “You need not fear his size. He favors you.”

Ana cast a skeptical glance over the brutish stallion, then cocked her head to one side. “He *favors* me? How can you be sure? Did he tell you as much?” she taunted.

The knight locked his gaze with hers. “I warrant, you’d know if he did not.” He let the implication of his statement hang between them, weighting the air.

Ana grew uncomfortable under his continued stare and shifted her eyes toward the monstrous horse once more. Hannibal looked like he would simply gobble up anything, or anyone, he disliked. In truth, the beast did unnerve her, but that wasn’t the reason she refused to ride. She’d ridden the full distance from Chinon to Tours pressed against the knight’s chest, his arm fastened securely around her. She could still feel the memory of his steely hold on her — about her waist and beneath her breasts.

She eyed the small cushion where she would be expected to ride pillion. Presumably, in order to remain seated, she would need to wrap her arms securely around the knight's middle. That would result in her breasts being pressed into his back for the entirety of the journey. She had no desire to endure such nearness, or intimacy, with the knight.

Then, too, there was the matter of the mail hauberk he wore beneath his surcoat. Her back still prickled from where she'd leaned against it during her journey here, the ringlets of iron overlaying the knight's hardened frame. Her backside had also suffered, and not a little, from the long hours spent in the saddle.

Instinctively, her hand sought the abused area and she rubbed at the soreness there. "'Tis not your horse that concerns me. I've had enough of riding for a time and much prefer to walk."

The movement of her hand drew the knight's gaze. Comprehension lit his eyes. Ana dropped her hand away instantly and shifted her stance. 'Twas a mistake, she realized at once, for now, his eyes fixed on the curve of her backside then slowly trailed upward. A tingling warmth passed through her.

"Very well, my lady." The knight cleared a roughness from his voice, one not present the moment before. "I shall walk with you and give Hannibal his leisure for now."

He raised steel-blue eyes to hers, sending waves of unease cresting through her. Was she ever to be affected so by the man's slightest attention toward her? He merited her scorn, not a blushing response.

"I am not your *lady*. And you needn't trouble yourself on my account. Ride if you wish."

"I find I, too, prefer to walk," he returned genially — too genially — one side of his lip tilting upward in a half smile.

Irritating man, she fumed silently. He knew full well she had no choice but to endure his presence.

Within the hour the travelers set forth from the city, heading north toward the duchy of Normandy. Tours had reminded Ana greatly of Chinon, with its narrow streets and half-timbered facades. Now, as with Chinon, the landscape outside the city walls quickly gave way to forests thick with oak and beech, opening from time to time onto luxuriant fields and vineyards.

As the road wound once more through the woodland, tiny, plump goldcrests swept overhead, twittering their high-pitched "zee-zee-zee" as they disappeared into the forest's canopy, ablaze with the reds and golds of autumn.

Ana stole a glance at the knight as he walked beside her, matching his pace to hers. He positively towered over her. She took in his mail hauberk and the unsightly, head-conforming hood that encased his hair. His trim beard and mustache were golden brown in color, and the bare portions of his face — what little showed of it — were tanned as though he'd labored long in the sun.

The knight's eyes suddenly shifted to hers and she quickly dropped her gaze away. Directing her attention frontward over their assorted companions, she shored up her nerve then blurted the question at the fore of her mind.

"How do you bear walking so long in your armor? It looks to be heavy and uncomfortable. Must you always wear it?"

"'Tis of little consequence and the day is most pleasant." He shrugged. "One must be ever prepared for the dangers of the road."

"Dangers?" Ana darted a glance along the fringes of the forest. Finding nothing of concern, she settled her eyes once more on the knight. "I know little of such things, though I've heard

tales of travelers' plights. Since arriving in Chinon many years ago, I've left its safety but once. My family traveled to Samur on a matter concerning my foster father's business."

"Then consider your journey to England a great adventure," he said lightly, almost cheerfully.

Ana stiffened. Was the man callous? He'd wreaked havoc on her life, preventing her marriage and stealing her from those she loved and from all she knew.

"What holds the prospect of adventure to you, Sir Knight, holds naught but heartbreak for me."

He blinked over eyes lit with surprise.

She ignored the look and drew her mantle close about her — a thin, unsubstantial shield between the knight and her frayed emotions.

"This morning you said we will travel first to Le Mans," she remarked, changing the subject.

"Aye. First to Le Mans, then on to Rouen and the coast at Boulogne. From there, we'll cross the Channel and land at Dover."

Ana pressed her lips together. She'd never sailed upon the water, nor seen *La Manche* — the Channel — or any great body of water for that matter.

"And what then will happen, once we land at Dover?"

"Then we'll seek the royal court, and I shall deliver you into the keeping of Lord Gilbert, your grandfather."

"He is *not* my grandfather," she said flatly.

"I have no doubt that he is."

"Your lack of doubt matters not one whit, Sir Knight. You shall be proven wrong and, by your own oath, you shall be required to return me to Chinon. 'Tis forgone."

He looked down his perfectly straight nose at her, at the same time hiking one brow high.

"You've a saucy tongue, one most unbecoming a lady. 'Twould be in your interest to harness that member before you assume your place as a highborn maiden and heiress. A sharp tongue could gain you unwelcome results."

He pulled his gaze from hers to stare straight ahead. "And my name is not Sir Knight. 'Tis Sir Royce de Warrene. You may address me as Sir Royce."

Ana lifted her chin. "As you wish, Sir Knight, but I am no lady and intend to prove it so."

A small muscle twitched at the corner of his eye as he glanced down at her. He regarded her with a narrow look. "By your mouth and manners you have already succeeded, but by blood you have not, as I've said before. Let us leave it at that."

Ana flinched at his censure, his opinion abundantly clear. Well, she'd wanted him to agree with her, had she not? And he did. In his eyes, owing to her behavior, she was no lady.

The thought rankled.

She cared not at all what he thought of her, she told herself. Not one speck, crumb, or jot. Not at all. She wished only to return to Chinon, to her foster parents and to Gervase, the man who loved her. Still, her curiosity needed.

Seeing the knight had lengthened his stride and pulled ahead of her with his massive horse, she quickened her steps to catch up with him, falling in by his side.

"Tell me, Sir Knight, should Lord Gilbert believe I am his lost granddaughter — not that I am, understand — but should he believe so, what will befall me then?"

He skipped a glance to her then returned his gaze ahead. "Why the very best things imaginable. He will recognize you as his heiress and install you at Penhurst, his estate. No doubt

he'll engage tutors to instruct you in the skills you lack and will need as a lady of import, and then he will seek a match for you."

"A match?" she frowned.

"A husband. I know naught of Lord Gilbert's standing or the extent of his holdings or titles, but I am certain he'll seek a fine match to improve your station and his whilst he lives. 'Tis the way of things."

Ana deepened her frown.

Seeing this, his own brows dipped. "Does that trouble you?"

"What say shall I have in this match?" Ana asked, fresh apprehensions clawing through her.

"What say need you have? Your grandfather shall choose best for you. He has your interests at heart."

"But he knows not my heart. I alone do. I would have a say in the choice."

The knight leveled her a patient, forbearing look. "You may express your feelings toward a prospective bridegroom, but your grandfather, being your guardian, will have the sole and final word in the matter. You must trust in his judgment."

Ana rooted to the ground, her fists flying to her hips, her arms bent akimbo.

"You mean, I am to have no voice in this? I am expected to wait, utterly mute, as a complete stranger to me makes a decision that will affect the rest of my life? That is monstrous! 'Tis known the way of nobility is different, but in this, this . . ."

She tossed her hands skyward, anger and indignation colliding in her, clogging her throat.

"I'll be no one's pawn, or puppet, or cat's-paw," she spat out at last. "You castlefolk scorn those of common stock, 'tis well known. But be assured, we enjoy freedoms far greater than your own. At least in this. I may have been raised as no more than the daughter of a townsman, but as such I have enjoyed a direct say in whom I would accept in marriage and who would have rights to my person, to my-my body," she blurted, shaking now.

Ana wrapped her arms protectively around her middle, having said far more than she'd intended, far more than what was wise.

The knight studied her, his expression perplexed. "I am sure your grandfather will consider your feelings in the matter. I did not mean to indicate otherwise. But, he does have the final decision."

"And I must obey, even if I do not agree with his choice?"

"Aye."

She clenched her teeth, her temper mounting. "And so a stranger, not even of this land — one claiming to be my grandfather — will have the right to give me over to yet another stranger as a bridal prize. And that stranger, in turn, will carry me off to another, more distant place, filled with even more strangers. Is that the way of it?"

"Lady Juliana," he soothed in his rich voice. "You will have a fine castle to oversee and servants—"

"I am not Juliana!" she flared, drawing the attention of the others. She lowered her voice, though only slightly. "I don't want castles, or servants, or strange men to take their pleasure upon my person or to tell me what I may and may not do. I want my cooper, Gervase. He will love me and care for me, even if humbly so." She dashed away a traitorous tear, searing the corner of her eye. "I'll speak no more on it."

Ana forced down the emotions that threatened to overtake her. Struggling to compose herself, she inhaled deep of the woodland's cool, earthy scents and drew into herself, shattered that — should she prove to be the lost heiress — she was destined to be gifted to some faceless

man, a prize trophy for his carnal appetites, one to beget his heirs upon. His own requirements, of course, would be based solely on his rank, power, and wealth. 'Twas what mattered most to nobles, all they truly understood.

Her foster mother's description of the sexual act seized Ana's thoughts, preyed upon her fears. She dreaded the prospect of such personal, physical invasion, of such total possession of her body. And what if the man selected for her was cruel? What if he abused her, beat her?

She'd chosen well in Gervase. He was a gentle man with a pleasant humor, one who would treat her kindly in all ways. He was also reliable and steadfast, a man she could depend upon and work beside in life, aiding him in his cooping business, loving him as his wife — partners, really. For all the castles and finery and luxuries in the world, she'd not trade the freedom she'd known these years — or Gervase — for any one of them.

Ana drank in another deep breath of the crisp autumn air. Its cool tendrils spiraled downward, filling her chest and wreathing her heart, chilling her there. She felt so vulnerable, so powerless. Yet, she wasn't truly so, her instincts told her. She was only as helpless as she allowed herself to be.

With each step, Ana collected her strength about her, her thoughts darting, swift as the goldcrests in the branches overhead.

She must escape. 'Twas the only way. Somehow, she must get back to Chinon and find Gervase. Then, they would both need flee and hide for a time — in a large city, one under the protection of the king of France, not John of England. *Paris!* Yes, that was the answer. She and Gervase could begin their life anew in Paris. Perhaps, her foster parents would join them there too.

Ana's spirits rose. When several of their companions started to sing a *rondeau* to pass the time, she even joined in the parts, which gained another surprised look from the knight. She granted him a smile, plotting her escape as she did. 'Twas urgent she learn all she could about their surroundings, direction, and other possible paths. When the right moment presented itself, she would elude Sir Royce de Warrene and slip away.

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Royce gaped when the maid smiled at him — a flash of white teeth, her emerald eyes shining. He noted how she picked up her pace, her step livelier. The limp she'd tried to conceal the last hour disappeared altogether.

Inexplicably, her whole mood had altered, significantly so. Royce pondered that. What could account for her sudden change of temperament, one minute snarling at him, the next minute gracing him with a bewitching smile?

And it was bewitching. She was beautiful when she smiled. God's toes, she was beautiful when she did not, and equally so even when she railed at him, anger firing her eyes, rendering them a deeper green.

The delicate waif he'd left in Vincelles a decade ago had certainly changed. No longer the timid little girl he'd found shrinking beneath the boat, she'd grown into an entrancing creature — spirited and strong willed and with the keenest of tongues.

He released a breath. Transforming the brewer's daughter, Ana, into the heiress Juliana Mandeville would be a challenge for her tutors. 'Twould require much work and patience to remold her manners and polish her common edges. Yet, he was reminded of a gemstone found in the rough and of the exquisite result it yielded once refined. 'Twould be someone else's task to transform this jewel, God give him or her strength. Surely 'twas worth the effort. Yet, would she ever accept her new place, even given time?

Royce watched Juliana sing, stepping forward as she joined in a repetition of the verses. His eyes skimmed over her bright, silvery hair and fine features, then slipped downward, tracing her high, full breasts, trim waist, and the swell of her hips. Even should the tutors fail and her manners remain lacking, he imagined it would forestall few suitors who would willingly take her to wife and climb into her bed.

Strange that she should be so averse to taking a husband of noble breeding. But then her objection lay not in the rank, but in being bedded by a stranger. Royce scratched his jaw through his beard. She wouldn't be the first maiden to be nervous about the intimacies of mating. Still, had he not discovered her on the church steps, about to wed? She must have come to terms with the realities of marriage in some measure. Or was it that the maid desired only the cooper?

Royce mentally chewed on that. Admittedly, he'd wondered whether Juliana was yet a virgin. 'Twould be no surprise if she weren't, given the practices of commoners. Upon being betrothed, 'twas said many couples of that class sought their fleshly pleasures before taking their wedding vows, not waiting for the sanction of the Church.

The image of Juliana coupling with the oafish cooper soured Royce's thoughts, and he blotted it from his mind. Perhaps the maid had had a bad experience with the physical aspects of lovemaking. Again his thoughts leaped back to the cooper, his mood darkening once more. Had the man been rough with Juliana in some way? Had anyone ever sought to harm her, sexually, over the years? Royce hardened his jaw, the question burning in his chest.

A loud thwack, followed by a crash and the splintering of wood seized his attention. Ahead, the dogs began to bark as the air filled with feathers and clucking chickens. Escaping the dog-drawn carts and their demolished cages, the birds flopped and flapped and scuttled into the woods. The company of travelers ceased their song, many rushing into the underbrush to recover the birds. At their lead was Mother Agnes and her four nuns. She urgently appealed to the others for help as the fowls were meant for their poor convent in Rouen.

The subsequent hours were spent collecting the chickens and recaging them in hastily repaired coops, putting the group sorely behind schedule. They'd anticipated reaching a Benedictine hostel outside Le Mans and stopping there overnight. Now, they were forced to camp along the roadside. Fortunately, they located a small clearing just off the main path, one backing to a stream.

Juliana's improved humor continued and no sharp words passed between them. They shared a meal in companionable silence, a simple affair of hard biscuits, dried meat, and cheese, plus a bladder of wine, which she instantly pronounced unfit for even Hannibal. Her foster father's beer and ale, she declared, were far superior.

As she nibbled a strip of venison, she glanced his way from time to time. Still, not even a hint of recognition appeared in her eyes. It pricked his pride. Why, exactly, he was unsure. 'Twas reasonable she wouldn't associate the scrawny lad he'd been with the man he'd grown to be, a decade older at that.

He studied her profile as she turned to gaze toward the neighboring campfire. There, Piperel, the juggler who traveled in their company, entertained the others, deftly tossing apples and pears in the air, keeping them in constant motion.

Royce tugged his beard. Perhaps now was an agreeable time to reveal his identity to Juliana. She deserved to know he was the squire who'd found her in Vaux long ago. 'Twould further lay to rest questions of her identity.

He set aside the chunk of cheese he'd been slicing and started to speak. But when he looked up again, he found she'd risen and now strode toward the others, fascinated as the juggler

exchanged knives for the fruit, manipulating them with great dexterity. Ending with a flourish, Piperel bowed deeply and held out his ragged hat. Juliana smiled then stepped off to join Mother Agnes's little troop. Together the women headed into the woods, presumably to see to their personal needs.

Royce vented a breath. Another time would serve as well to speak with Juliana on his role in Vaux. Many days of travel still lay ahead of them.

He rose and gathered the remnants of his meal and returned them to the leather pouch that rested on the ground beside his new saddle. He next set aside his sword and scabbard, then stripped away his surcoat, hauberk, and undertunic, baring his arms and upper torso.

Royce caught up the skin of water he'd filled earlier from the stream and doused his hair and chest, rinsing away the sweat and dust gained in the day's travels. As he toweled himself dry, he moved toward Hannibal to groom him as he did each night. At his approach, the stallion nickered a greeting. Royce grinned.

"Here we are again at eventide, old friend. Tell me, have you any advice for dealing with mettlesome maidens?"

Hannibal bobbed his head then nuzzled Royce's hand, then his pantleg, seeking a treat.

"An apple? 'Twill take more than that to win Juliana's cooperation."

Royce took up a cloth and began rubbing down Hannibal with long, rhythmic strokes. When the women did not soon reappear, he glanced toward the point where they'd entered the forest. Diverting his gaze to the men in their small encampment, he studied them closely, counting their number, but noted none to be missing.

Royce turned back to the stallion. Perhaps the women lingered by the stream to refresh themselves or rinse their clothes.

One thing for certain. They wouldn't have ventured far. The sun descended quickly now, dipping behind the trees. 'Twould soon be dark.

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Ana quickened her pace, anxious to place more distance between herself and the nuns. Thankfully, she'd been able to slip away unnoticed when the sisters settled themselves beside the stream to say their evening Office.

Pressing through the underbrush, Ana hastened deeper into the forest. When she came upon a narrow trail, she immediately followed it, believing it to be a heavenly sign. Surely, God guided her steps. She'd prayed for His help and He'd answered, swiftly so, providing her this opportunity to escape. Now, she must seize the moment and make good her flight.

Yet, fear gnawed at her nerves. She'd had little time to think through a plan, scarcely any. She must reach Tours, then Chinon, that much she knew. She owed the earlier ordeal with the chickens to Divine intervention. The delay had prevented the group from reaching the Benedictine hostel where she would have been closely watched and where 'twould have been nearly impossible to escape.

Her earlier conversation with the knight still galled her. The ways of the nobility regarding unwed maidens were loathsome. She'd not be herded to England like a prize cow, to be tethered by some ancient lord in his castle till he saw fit to give her to another of his choosing. She'd have none of it.

Though it frightened her to the bone to place herself in possible danger, circumstances demanded she be both brave and bold. She'd take this one risk in order to return to Gervase and seek a new life with him. It stood to reason, if the Almighty provided her the opportunity to escape, He would also protect her.

Ana hurried on, brambles and branches clutching at her mantle and gown, tearing at her hair. She thought only of fleeing the knight and finding a place to hide. If she could successfully elude him this night, then with the first rays of dawn, she could follow the road back to Tours, keeping to the edges of the forest. Once there, with luck, she could join another group of travelers heading south. For now, she'd not think on the possibility of vagabonds or thieves who might plague the highway. She'd encountered none on her journey thus far, and with luck, she'd reach the city before sunset tomorrow.

"Faith, Ana," she mumbled to herself, gripping hold of the silver cross about her neck as she rushed on.

Pain twinged her feet, sore and blistered from the day's walk. Now acorns, sticks, and other debris on the forest floor bit through her thin slippers and into the soles. She tightened her jaw tight against the pain, knowing she'd no choice but to suffer it.

The sun blazed through the leafage of trees like a great orange ball, sinking lower with each passing minute. As Ana continued along the winding trail, she realized with a start 'twas likely a path used by the forest animals. The thought offered little comfort for her nerves, but there was no help for it.

Minutes later a distinct rustling noise sounded in the undergrowth off to her left. Ana halted, her pulse leaping. She quickly scanned the area, her gaze drawing to a feathery, knee-high bush that shivered and shook. In the next moment, a large hare sprang out of the foliage and scampered away, disappearing down the trail.

Ana gasped, then expelled her breath, her heart beating madly in her chest. Collecting herself, she forced herself on. From some unseen perch, an owl called, a haunting sound that sent chills along her spine. Other woodland dwellers added their own whistlings and chitterings as the forest came alive with dusk.

As Ana won further into the wood, she again heard rustlings in the underbrush ahead, as though something rummaged there. The vegetation quivered and trembled, much like before. Ana smiled, thinking the hare to be there, perhaps tussling with a furry cousin.

"Ah, 'tis you again. Did you find a friend?"

The words barely left her lips when her gaze touched upon the ground in front of the bush. Acorns lay scattered over the soil beneath an aged oak. Sections of earth lay turned and bare where, presumably, some of the delicacies had been devoured. A set of hooved tracks imprinted the dirt, leading into the underbrush.

Ana swallowed, her breath sealing in her throat, as the rustlings there turned to agitated thrashings. Something skulked beneath the forest cover. Something of significant size.

Her blood went to ice as a wild boar emerged from the leafy growth — a *sanglier*. 'Twas a hideous creature, massive and humpbacked, teeth bristling from its mouth. Her eyes widened at the size of the beast's fierce, curving tusks. They could rip her to shreds in an instant.

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A strangled cry rent the air. A woman's cry. *Juliana!*

Royce dropped the cloth, spun from the stallion to snatch up his sword, then bolted headlong into the forest.

Coming upon the nuns where they huddled round-eyed by the stream, he scarce spared them a glance but splashed through the water and sprinted on in the direction of the maid's screams. Quickly, he came to a path and followed it. Within moments, he closed on an ancient, spreading oak. To his surprise, Juliana clung to its lowermost branch. Below, a large black boar slashed at the tree's trunk with its tusks, squealing and grunting as it did.

“Sohow! Sohow!” Royce shouted, drawing the beast’s attention to himself, casting off the scabbard from his sword as he did.

The boar turned, snorting fiercely, fury burning in its savage little eyes. Again Royce clamored at the animal, waving his arms and blade, striving to lure the animal away from the tree, away from Juliana.

Royce steeled himself, knowing the perils of challenging a boar on foot. Better to face such a creature mounted, with a long spear and a dozen hounds to aid him. But he did not have that advantage. He’d only his sword and one chance to slay the beast. Should he miss his mark, the boar would dispatch him with a single swipe of its tusks, splitting him from groin to chest.

Royce gripped the pommel of his sword with both hands, holding the blade before him. He studied the animal for the telling signs that would signal the onset of its attack.

The beast watched him as well, with eyes full of malice. Clashing its tusks over its teeth, sharpening them, it took several steps forward, then backed once more beneath the branch where the maid yet clung. Should she lose her grip, she’d land atop the animal and meet a swift and grisly end.

Royce shouted again, anxious to draw the boar off. “Here, you snout-faced monstrosity. Over here!” He waved his blade, baiting the creature.

The boar snorted, the bristles raising on its black hump, its ears flattened against its head.

“What are you waiting for?” Royce harried. “Come, taste my steel.”

At that, the beast rolled its eyes, pricking its ears and lowering its head as it drove toward Royce, enraged.

Royce braced his stance, tightening his grip on the pommel as he targeted the beast. His heart thundered in his chest as he watched the boar close the distance. At the last possible moment, Royce sidestepped the creature, inverted his sword, and plunged its point into the swine’s neck. His muscles shuddered as he drove the blade full to the hilt and sundered the beast’s heart. Squealing and thrashing, the boar stumbled, dragging Royce with it to the ground as it brawled with the steel and finally convulsed. At last it grunted and slackened upon his sword.

For a moment, Royce lay heaving where he lay, eye to eye with the beast, its tusks having laid open several inches of his forearm. His hands gripped the pommel so tightly, at first, he was unable to pry his fingers loose.

Voices sounded around him — the tinker, mason, several of the pilgrims, and others — awed that he’d killed the beast single-handedly. Royce pushed to his feet, then made his way toward the oak on unsteady feet. Glancing up to the maiden, he noticed for the first time how her gown bunched upward, revealing long legs, bared and scratched. He noticed, too, the panicked expression that remained on her face.

Exhausted and with little strength left to climb trees, he held up his arms to her. “Can you manage to swing down? I shall catch you.”

Shakily, she unwound herself from the branch. Freeing her legs, then releasing her hold, she dropped into his arms. Royce staggered back as he caught her, his hands tangled in the skirt of her gown and her hair tumbled across his face. As he secured her against him, he felt the warmth of her palms on his shoulder and that of her body pressed against his.

Lowering her to the ground, she slid down his length. But when the maid’s feet touched the earth, she suddenly flung her arms about his middle and squeezed him tight. Suddenly, the long years that had separated them since Vaux shrank to naught. Once more, she seemed the terrified waif he’d discovered beneath the boat. Instinctively, his arms enveloped her.

Several minutes passed before he came back to himself. 'Twas no child he held, but a young woman. A young woman who'd purposely taken to the forest this night and nearly cost him his life.

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Ana shook against the knight's chest, her arms entwined about him. But as the horror of the moment passed, she realized her cheek lay against the bare, sculpted muscles of his torso.

Ana jerked back, releasing her hold on him. She shoved her hair from her eyes and looked up at him through the fading light. The knight's virile good looks stole her breath. 'Twas the first time she'd seen him without his hood of mail. Seen him half-naked, with a thick mane of hair flowing to broad, well-defined shoulders.

She dropped away her gaze, then saw the injury to his arm, suffered because of her.

"You're hurt." She voiced the obvious, at a loss for words.

"Aye, that I am," he stated in a tone unexpectedly stern. "Why did you come so far into the forest?"

The question surprised her, as did his look, which held something in it more akin to anger than to relief or thankfulness that the ordeal with the boar was past.

"I-I became lost," she replied defensively. "I wandered away from the sisters and must have gone in the wrong direction."

"A lie." His eyes narrowed. "The camp is visible enough from the stream. You did not stray from the sisters. You were seeking to escape."

"No, truly I—"

"Have you no sense? The forest is filled with wild creatures, any number of which would happily dispatch you and make a fine meal of you."

Heat rose to Ana's cheeks. "I knew God would protect me and He did!"

"So, you did seek to escape."

Not waiting on an answer, he seized her by the arm and moved toward the beast. He drew his sword from its carcass, then turned to Juliana and directed her back along the path. The others could do what they wished with the swine.

"You're right," he growled at Ana. "God did protect you. He sent me after you — to save you from yourself. Remember that, should you think to run off again. I've no intention of letting you slip away. Upon my oath, you are in my keeping, and so shall you remain."

End of Sample

The Story Continues!

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Author Biography



Kathleen Kirkwood is the pseudonym for award-winning, best-selling author Anita Gordon. Having an abiding love for history, she enjoys setting her stories in distant times and places long past. To date they include Medieval adventures and Late Victorian paranormal romances. After forty years of travels and raising children in various locations, Kirkwood and her husband have returned to the Southwest where they first met. Currently, she is dusting off and revising her backlist for release in digital and print format. She is also working on a new novel, a haunting tale set on the Chesapeake Bay and the shores of historic Southern Maryland. Look for *Pirates' Moon* in late 2013. Visit her at:

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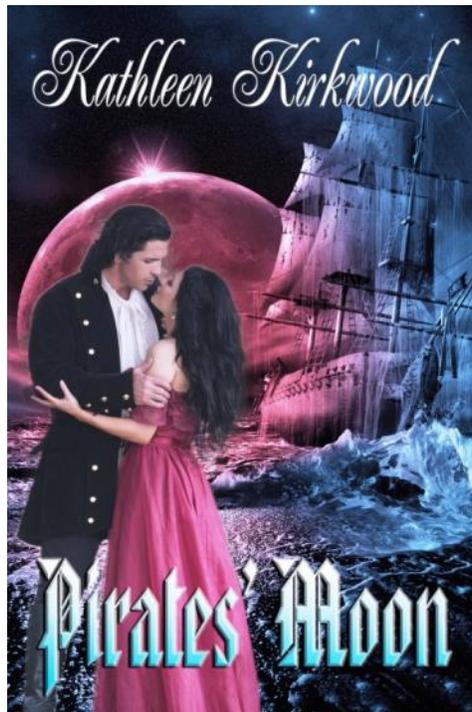
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